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The two-volume *Cambridge History of Atheism* offers an authoritative and up-to-date account of a subject of contemporary interest. Comprised of sixty essays by an international team of scholars, this *History* is comprehensive in scope. The essays are written from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including religious studies, philosophy, sociology, and classics. Offering a global overview of the subject, from antiquity to the present, the volumes examine the phenomenon of unbelief in the context of Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, and Jewish societies. They explore atheism and the early modern Scientific Revolution, as well as the development of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and its continuing implications. The *History* also includes general survey essays on the impact of scepticism, agnosticism, and atheism, as well as contemporary assessments of thinking. Providing essential information on the nature and history of atheism, *The Cambridge History of Atheism* will be indispensable for both scholarship and teaching, at all levels.

STEPHEN BULLIVANT is Professor of Theology and Sociology of Religion at St. Mary's University in the United Kingdom, and Professorial Research Fellow in Theology and Sociology at the University of Notre Dame in Australia. He is the author of *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* and *Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Religious America(ns)*, and editor, with Michael Ruse, of *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*.

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THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF ATHEISM

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Atheism from Antiquity to Modernity

*

Atheism in the Contemporary World

*

Edited by

STEPHEN BULLIVANT

St. Mary's University, UK

University of Notre Dame, Australia

MICHAEL RUSE

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To the memory of Sonja Luehrmann

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Introduction

Atheism in the early twenty-first century is a much-discussed topic. From New Atheism's explosion onto bestseller lists and bus sides in the mid-years of the "noughties," to ongoing human-rights abuses both of non-believers in some highly religious countries and of religious believers by officially atheistic ones, to a steady stream of surveys showing the rapid rise of non-religiosity in parts of the world, to – well – a great deal else besides, the topic is often in the media, and thus the public eye. This is not, in itself, a new phenomenon. Particular issues, campaigns, movements, philosophies, and people, relating to atheism in various ways, might come and go. But they have been coming and going for an awfully long time, and in a very wide spread of cultures and contexts. Atheism was "a much-discussed topic" in fourth-century BC Athens, second-century AD Asia Minor, eleventh-century France, thirteenth-century India, seventeenth-century England, and nineteenth-century South Africa. These are, moreover, just a few of the times and places whence atheism's much-discussed topicality has been preserved in the documentary record – and thus with accompanying selection bias as to the sorts of people whose discourse gets recorded. The prevalence of the topic in conversation, around campfires, in drawing rooms, on factory floors, or in trenches, necessarily goes undocumented. Certainly, Ivan Karamazov's observation about 1870s "Russian boys" applies very much more widely:

> Take, for instance, some stinking local tavern. They meet there and settle down in a corner . . . Well, then, what are they going to argue about, seizing this moment in the tavern? About none other than the universal questions: is there a God, is there immortality? . . . And many, many of the most original Russian boys do nothing but talk about the eternal questions, now, in our time. Isn't it so? (Dostoevsky [1880] 2004, 234)

But why? According to other reference works on the subject, the word "atheism" simply denotes one of two things: "A belief in the non-existence

of a God or gods, or (more broadly) an absence of belief in their existence" (Bullivant and Lee 2016; see also Martin 2007; Bullivant and Ruse 2013). Now either of these (partly overlapping) intellectual positions represents an interesting bit of metaphysical speculation, and a worthy thesis for if-so-inclined philosophers to spend their time thinking, writing, and arguing about. But then there are lots of "interesting bits of metaphysical speculation" that would fit that bill. Not many of them have generated so much interest, including utopian enthusiasm and abject horror alike, through the ages. Not many of them, more to the point, have been thought worthy of a two-volume *Cambridge History Handbook*.

This is not to deny that atheism, atheistic thinking, and various packaged systems of ideas in which one or other form of atheism takes a more-or-less prominent place, are themselves significant purely in terms of intellectual history. For instance, within western medieval philosophy, the sheer *idea* of atheism first rises to prominence as a kind of way-out thought experiment. *What if*, St. Anselm of Canterbury wondered in the eleventh century, there was actually someone who didn't already believe that there's a God? How might one convince him that there is? There's no real suggestion that Anselm is thinking here of any real person (other than the proverbial "fool" of Psalms 14 and 53): his unbeliever is purely a "theoretical construct" (Weltecke 2013, 171), like Descartes' "evil deceiver," Nozick's "utility monster," or Baggini's "pig who wants to be eaten." Two centuries later, Thomas Aquinas could also *imagine* there being a proponent of the view "that God does not exist" – indeed, he goes further than Anselm in coming up with some arguments to support it (Davies 2013, 119–21). But again, Thomas betrays no indication that atheism is in any sense a pressing, contemporary concern. His interest in atheists is purely theoretical, and is no less valid for that. (On a related note, one of us [Bullivant] used to raise a weak smile from his freshman "Moral Philosophy 101" students by ending the first lecture by saying "So, the *next* time you find yourselves in a mine, with a runaway trolley barreling down toward you – we've all been there.")

The truth is, though, this is only a part of atheism's interest and importance. The history of atheism is not only one of ideas, but also of the powerful social, moral, political, and economic influences both of, and upon, those ideas, as well as of the people holding them. To put it rather simply, throughout history atheism both has, and is seen to have, very practical ramifications: it *matters* (see Ruse 2014). So much so that, even in many times and places where it is a moot point whether there actually *were* any atheists, atheism was not merely much talked about and fretted over, but often

actively legislated against. Within a few centuries of Anselm and Aquinas, for example, European atheism had become an urgent social issue, with atheists widely recognized as a significant, if malign, sector of society. A 1603 petition to King James I of England, asking that Catholics be granted free exercise of their religion, notes that there are four types of Englishmen: Protestants, Puritans, Catholics, and "Atheists [. . .] who live on brawls." The French philosopher Mersenne, writing in 1623, estimated that there were as many as 50,000 atheists living in Paris alone (Robichaud 2013, 179). Floods of writings were devoted to the problem and its varied, and horrifying, implications (Spencer 2014; Ryrie 2019). Before long, imputations of atheism were as frequent in scholarly debates as imputations of Nazism are in today's online flamewars. Thus, Alan Charles Kors comments on "the almost ubiquitous desire, in philosophical polemics, to portray one's opponents' arguments as leading inadvertently to atheism" (2013, 197). As it happens, whether there really *were* (m)any actual atheists in England or France during this sustained period of "moral panic" is difficult to ascertain. Nor was this a wholly novel phenomenon in western history: over a millennium before, Christians and pagans in the Roman Empire routinely accused each other of "atheism" (or rather, of the Greek noun *atheotes*, which the English word "atheism" was much later coined to translate). Indeed, different camps of Christians sometimes denounced each other as such, hence a fourth-century Arian bishop of Antioch being known to posterity as Aëtius the Atheist (Bullivant 2020a).

This pattern of deep and widespread concern *about* atheism, coupled with an (at most) unclear historical record of there being any atheists, is a pattern that will be encountered in several of these volumes' chapters. This ought not surprise us. In much the same way as one could write (and as several historians indeed have) rich and informative histories "of," say, Atlantis or El Dorado without either place ever having existed, there is much valuable history of atheism to be found in those times and places where "atheism" was widely and hotly discussed, and often enough acted upon (e.g. laws being written, treatises being composed, accusations being made). In such contexts, to paraphrase the question motivating Richard Taruskin's magisterial history of western music, the historian's task is to explore the question "What has [atheism] *meant*?" (see Taruskin 2011, xi).

All that said, the history of atheism is *not* primarily a history of windmill-tilting. There are and have been very large numbers of genuine atheists throughout human history – very many more, and in far more diverse settings, than is often assumed. Atheism is not, as many of these volumes' chapters also testify, purely a modern, western, or elite phenomenon. In the

current jargon of the social sciences, there might be a lot of "WEIRD" atheists, but atheism itself is very far indeed from being an exclusively WEIRD phenomenon.[1] In very many cases, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have only fairly recently begun uncovering and studying them. While there have been a relatively small number of book-length treatments of the "history of atheism" published over the past fifty years, these have typically focused on western atheism(s), whether explicitly or implicitly. They have also tended to follow a somewhat formulaic track, concentrating primarily on intellectual history: typically beginning with the pre-Socratics and tracing a more-or-less linear progression through European history (perhaps with an added "American" chapter covering Paine, Ingersoll, the Scopes Monkey Trial, etc.), and ending at some symbolic point in the twentieth century (Russell, the fall of the Berlin Wall) or, if published in the last decade or so, with New Atheism. We have no desire to deride this enterprise; indeed, we are proud to have overseen an especially fine example of the genre, in the eight chapters comprising *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*'s "History of (Western) Atheism" section (Bullivant and Ruse 2013, 139–260). But clearly, they are very far from the full story.

Recognizing this problem is, however, only the beginning. Thankfully, over the past decade or two, a growing number of scholars – ranging from gnarled "one last job before retirement" veterans to "hungry kids trying to make a name for themselves"[2] – have begun to address precisely these lacunae (Alexander, 2019). Critically, as well as individually producing innovative and insightful work, they have *organized*. A multidisciplinary "Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network" (NSRN) was founded in 2008, followed by a dedicated "International Society for Historians of Atheism, Secularism, and Humanism" (ISHASH) in 2014. Many contributors to this *Cambridge History of Atheism* are members of one or both, and we have made liberal and grateful use of both networks' social and intellectual capital in identifying potential authors (with particular thanks here due to Dr. Nathan Alexander, co-founder of ISHASH). These networks have in turn spawned, directly and indirectly, conferences, curricula, research projects, journals (*Secularism and Nonreligion*, *Secular Studies*), and book series (NYU Press' "Secular Studies," De Gruyter's

1 The acronym refers to people raised in "Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies" (Henrich et al. 2010) and who, far from constituting the social, cultural, and psychological "human norm," are outliers in many deep, important respects.

2 Disclaimer: this should in no way be interpreted as an autobiographical remark. No, siree.

"Religion and Its Others," Palgrave Macmillan's "Histories of Sacred and Secular, 1700–2000"). We might well also add here the belated addition of volumes dedicated to "atheism" or "secularism" or "humanism" to leading, blue-ribbon reference series (in addition to those already mentioned: Grayling and Copson 2015; Zuckerman and Shook 2017). While academic fads and trends *du jour* may come and go – there is no shortage of failed (sub)fields – this burgeoning "academic architecture" is a strong indicator that *non-religion studies* is now firmly established (in more detail, see Bullivant 2020b).

The reasons *why* studying atheism and related topics seemed so suddenly to emerge as a "hot topic" since the dawn of the new millennium is itself an interesting question, having only rarely been much of one before. Concerning the latter, academic perversity, obscurantism, myopia, and sheer bloody-mindedness cannot, indeed must not ever, be discounted as an explanation here. Yet that does not account for why, in several disciplines (including both intellectual and social history, as well as sociology, anthropology, psychology) and across many countries, there issued first a steady stream, and now a mighty river, of articles and books, either breaking new ground in wholly new areas, or else fruitfully revisiting *relatively* well-trodden paths. New Atheism played a role in this, to be sure, including – of particular relevance here – its leading authors' own, often problematic handling of historical evidence and arguments (Painter 2014; Johnstone 2018). But New Atheism was itself, as several of the growing band of atheism researchers have detailed at length, part of much wider and deeper social, cultural, and political currents (Amarasingam 2010; Cimino and Smith 2014; Cotter et al. 2017).

Whatever the ultimate reasons and motivations, readers of these two volumes should and will be very grateful for them. First, and most obviously, this *Cambridge History* is a much more ambitious affair than anything previously attempted: sixty chapters, spread over two volumes, and authored by a world-leading collection of experts. Second, while covering the standard ground of "western atheism" (and indeed, much more fully and rigorously than attempted in any previous work), very significant attention is given to the atheism(s) of other contexts, both geographical and sociocultural (e.g. women's, black, and working-class atheisms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; atheism online; atheistic themes in music, literature, film, and the visual arts), and from a wealth of historiographical perspectives. None of this would have been possible, on anything like this scale, even ten years ago. The recent surge of scholarly interest in atheism and related topics is reflected on almost every page of these two tomes.

Assiduous introduction-readers will be pleased that we are here eschewing the bewilderingly common editorial practice of offering potted synopses of each chapter here: "A bad cover version . . . is not the real thing" (Cocker [2001] 2011, 101). Just go read them. Accordingly, it remains only for us to observe and lament a number of absences. Even a massive undertaking such as this cannot and should not aim to be exhaustive. Some topics we *might* have included, but decided against due to constraints of space or focus ("to the great detriment of the overall enterprise": There. We've said it, so journal reviewers don't have to.) Most obviously, we have had to be selective in which geographical "case studies" to focus on in the penultimate section. There are also topics which we had hoped to include but could not. We simply could not find someone to do it, or the person we *had* signed up ended up not being able to, and no suitable replacement could be found in time. Such are the crosses common to all editors in this postlapsarian *lacrimarum valle*: we bear them as stoically as others. Of a wholly different order, however, is another kind of absence.

The original proposal for this volume, submitted in 2017, contained a "wish list" of planned chapters and dreamed-of contributors. Among them, naturally enough, was Dr. Sonja Luehrmann of Simon Fraser University, whose incisive studies of Soviet-era Russian atheism had placed her very firmly in our minds. Two books in particular, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* and *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge*, established her at the vanguard of the new history of atheism. We were, therefore, delighted that she graciously accepted our cold-call invitation to write.

We learned, with shock and sadness, of Dr. Sonja Luehrmann's untimely death in August 2019. We wish to thank here Dr. Victoria Smolkin and Dr. Victoria Frede – fellow members of that same vanguard (the history of Russian atheism has been remarkably well-served) – for ensuring, in tribute to their friend and colleague, that her space in the volume was not left empty. We hereby dedicate *The Cambridge History of Atheism* to Dr. Luehrmann. It is small compensation, but we hope that her family will feel ongoing pride at her legacy as a scholar and, above all, as a human being of great worth.

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PART I

⋆

PRELIMINARIES

1

Linguistic History of the Terms 'Atheism' and 'Atheist'

PHILIP DURKIN

This short note will look at the history of Greek *atheos* and words ultimately derived from it (or in some cases modelled on it) in Greek, Latin, English, and a selection of other modern vernacular languages of western Europe.[1] It will concentrate primarily on when each of these words first appeared in each language, with a brief consideration of its meaning. As writers far more expert on the history of atheism show in many places in this volume, investigating the history of atheistic beliefs throughout most of history is plagued by the difficulty that dire (and generally fatal) penalties could be incurred for the avowal of such beliefs. Most of the evidence for words meaning 'atheism', 'atheist', or 'atheistic' comes in the form of accusations levelled against individuals and/or their ideas or beliefs, and in some cases rebuttals of these, in which semantic clarity is often deliberately avoided.

Ancient Greek *atheos* is formed by derivation from *theos*, 'god' (also found in the adjectival meaning 'divine' in compound formations), with the prefix *a-*. This prefix is 'privative', that is indicating negation or absence of what is denoted by the word stem; in *atheos* its intention appears to be to indicate absence of belief in or piety towards god(s). It is attested in a number of texts from the fifth and fourth centuries BC. It appears to mean 'denying (or not believing in) the gods', most clearly when used in Socrates' forensic examination of the charges levelled against him (and hence of the meaning intended or implied by use of the word *atheos*) in Plato's Apology;[2] it probably also has

1 The information given here is drawn from the major historical and etymological dictionaries for each language, supplemented in some instances by information from corpora or text databases, particularly, in the case of English, from *Early English Books Online*.

2 Plato *Apology* 26c. For further details for this and all other references to Greek authors in this paragraph, see: Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (eds.). *A Greek–English Lexicon*, revised and augmented throughout by Sir Henry Stuart Jones with the assistance of Roderick McKenzie. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940. Revised supplement ed. P. G. W. Glare with the assistance of A. A. Thompson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

this meaning when applied to Socrates' contemporary Diagoras. It also occurs with the meaning 'godless, ungodly, impious' in works by the tragedians Aeschylus and Sophocles, the lyric poet Pindar, the orator Lysias, and the soldier Xenophon. This use need not be developed from the meaning 'denying (or not believing in) the gods', but could instead arise directly from the meanings of the constituent elements of the word. The latter route of development probably explains use in the meaning 'abandoned by the gods' in Sophocles and in the lyric poet Bacchylides, as also use of the derived adverb *atheōs* in the meaning 'by the anger of heaven'. The derived noun *atheotēs* similarly ranges in meaning between 'atheism', 'godlessness', and 'neglect of the gods of the state'.

The Greek word was borrowed into Latin as *atheos*, first attested in the second century AD with reference (again) to Diagoras, and from the fourth century in the meaning 'that does not believe in (the Christian) God'.

Interestingly, no particularly marked lexical developments appear to have occurred in the Middle Ages, and, rather remarkably, no word from this family appears to have been borrowed into any of the medieval western vernaculars.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a series of interrelated lexical developments are found across western European vernacular languages and (apparently largely in reaction to these) in Latin.

Latin *atheos* (and hence Greek *atheos*) is reflected by forms across the Romance languages: French *athée* (1543 as noun, 1680 as adjective; Rabelais earlier uses Latin and Greek forms of the word), Spanish *ateo* (1595), Italian *ateo* (1650), Portuguese *ateu* (1671; 1611 as *atheo* 1611), and even Romanian *ateu* (1694).

Besides these forms, a whole constellation of new derivative formations occur, especially in French: *athéisme* atheism (ante 1543), *athéiste* atheist, atheistic (rare) (1549 as noun, 1541 as adjective), *athéiser* to profess atheism (1587), *athéen* atheist (1619), and also *athéologien* impious or atheist theologian (i.e. a blend of *athée* and *théologien*; 1596). Compare also: Italian *ateismo* (1584), *ateista* (noun, end of the sixteenth century), *ateistico* (adjective, ante 1639); Portuguese *ateismo* (1634), *ateista* (adjective, 1600), *ateistico* (adjective, 1699); Spanish *ateismo* (ante 1745).

Intertwined with these appear to be a corresponding set of new derivative formations in post-classical Latin: *atheia* atheism (ante 1540), *atheismus* atheism (ante 1564 in Calvin), *atheista* atheist (ante 1605), *atheisticus* atheistic (1662); compare also *atheologus* untheological (*c.* 1620).

Also, in the early modern period, a corresponding wide range of formations ultimately based on Latin *atheos* and Greek *atheos* begin to appear in English:

atheonism (*c*. 1534 in a translation of the Italian humanist Polydore Vergil; very rare);
atheism (second half of the sixteenth century, and occurring in well over 100 different works of very varied authorship and genre before 1600);
atheist (mid-sixteenth century as noun, and occurring in hundreds of works of very varied authorship and genre before 1600; seventeenth century or earlier as adjective);
atheistical (1580s; becoming very common after 1600);
athean and *atheal* (both adjectives, first attested in the early 1600s, and somewhat rare);
atheistic (1634; much less common in the 1600s than *atheist* or *atheistical*).

Lexical borrowing is frequently an indicator of the importance of ideas across cultures. Lexical productivity – that is, the formation of new derivative formations – is often likewise an indicator of the importance of an idea within a culture. If multiple synonymous terms occur, this often indicates that a culture is hurrying to accommodate a new idea or set of ideas. By all of these measures, the early modern period is highlighted as one in which an old idea was the focus of intense attention.

2

Histories of Atheism: Key Questions and Disputes

NATHAN G. ALEXANDER

As the present volume demonstrates, atheism has a long history that spans multiple countries and eras, but even more than that, the history of atheism itself has a history. The goal of this chapter is to offer a look at how historians and other scholars over time have tried to tell the story of atheism. Because of space limitations, this cannot approach a comprehensive study of works on the history of atheism. Rather, I focus specifically on those works that discuss the history of atheism on a large scale, across many centuries and multiple countries.

This chapter highlights some of the key issues in writing the history of atheism, and the various ways these might be addressed. To draw out these issues, I have divided histories of atheism into two main schools: those writing from an atheist or secular perspective and those writing from a Christian or theological perspective. It is important to note that I am constructing this division for purposes of analysis, and authors might not necessarily position themselves as writing from a particular 'school'. Likewise, works on the history of atheism need not fall into either camp, although it is true that this topic has frequently attracted partisans on either side to write about the topic, which in turn influences the kind of histories they write. It should also be noted that works on either side need not be seen as more or less scholarly than the other. With these caveats in mind, I believe dividing the chapter in this way helps to bring to the fore some of the major questions and disagreements about the history of atheism.

Some of the key questions we will see in this chapter are: what is atheism? Is it merely a rejection of theism (i.e. a negative thing) or is it a positive and constructive worldview that exists independently of theism and moves beyond simply offering arguments against theism? When and where does atheism emerge? Is it a universal phenomenon or contingent on particular contexts? What should the history of atheism be about? Should it be about

explaining how atheism arose, or should it be about explaining how atheists lived, the contributions they made, and their fight for their freedom of conscience? What is the future trajectory of atheism based on the study of its history? Is it only getting stronger or has it already reached its peak and is now declining? As we will see, the two perspectives offer different answers to these questions.

Atheist/Secular Perspectives

Works in this school see atheism as a truth that would be discovered over time. Of course, the authors are more or less careful to note the political, social, or philosophical conditions under which atheistic ideas could develop, but generally they hold that these ideas are right and that there is a general correlation between societal progress and the progress of atheism. Likewise, these works are more inclined to view atheism broadly: to treat it as synonymous with broader categories like freethought, scepticism, or unbelief. With this in mind, these authors are often more willing to see atheistic arguments as near-universal phenomena that could crop up in different times and spaces.

Narrative histories from the atheist perspective began to come about in the late nineteenth century at the same time as popular freethought movements emerged in Europe and North America. These works are more interested in the history of freethought than in the history of atheism, although the latter is a subset of the former. The earliest of these is the British freethinker Charles Watt's *History of Freethought* (1876) as part three of *The Free-Thinker's Text-Book*. Like other works in this school, Watts defined freethought broadly. For him, freethought 'does not consist in a form of belief, nor in a code of unbelief, but in the right to think, and to give expression to such thoughts, without persecution following as the result' (Watts 1876, 492).

For Watts, there was something timeless about freethought and he admitted that writing a total history of it 'would really involve the entire history of mankind' since the struggle between freethought and orthodoxy had been present in all times and places (Watts 1876, 494). Watts, however, focused almost entirely on the Christian era, and surprisingly about two-thirds of the book were devoted to the history before the sixteenth century. He wrote a few sentences about ancient Greek and Roman freethought before moving to consider the Christian Middle Ages, a period covered by 'a dense, opaque cloud of ignorance and barbarism' and one in which 'Freethought was outwardly invisible' (Watts 1876, 533). It was during this dark period,

however, that much ancient learning was preserved in the Islamic world, and Watts spoke positively of the tolerance and openness of Islamic society.

The centuries following the Renaissance and Reformation saw a continual shift to ever-greater nonconformity and on to deism and atheism. Here, Watts broke up the narrative and included a handful of short biographies of leading deists and freethinkers, including Benedict de Spinoza, David Hume, and Baron d'Holbach. The section on the nineteenth century is surprisingly brief and detailed the removal of barriers against freethinkers and the granting of greater political power to the masses, particularly in Britain. By then, science and reason had triumphed and Watts was confident about the future: 'liberty and civilisation in this country [Britain] may now be said to be for ever [sic] secure' (Watts 1876, 765).

A similar work is American freethought activist Samuel Porter Putnam's *400 Years of Freethought* (1894). The 400 years in question began with Columbus' voyage to the Americas in 1492. Putnam was not unambiguously supportive of Columbus' achievement, and he painted a grim picture of the bloody conquest of the indigenous people, but Putnam thought that his voyages, and those that came after, marked the birth of a new era of questioning.

Like Watts' book, but much expanded, in many ways the book is a collection of the heroes of freethought arranged in a chronological, progressive sequence in which they arrive closer and closer to the truth. As he explained, 'I shall try and interpret history by personalities rather than by events, for it is in personalities that we see the hights [sic] and depths of human life, that we witness the trend of civilization' (Putnam 1894, 15). Putnam's work is characterized by often over-the-top prose about the triumph of freethought ideals and the final vanquishing of superstitious Christianity. For example: 'Through darkness and struggle; through bloody war; through torture and terror; through superstition, ignorance, and tyranny, Freethought has steadily pushed onward, with true Promethean fire, with the torch of reason, with undaunted face, with unreceding step, until now it leads the world with victorious colors' (Putnam 1894, 11).

Putnam, like Watts, focuses on freethought rather than specifically atheism. He variously defined 'freethought' as 'the spirit of doubt', but also as the scientific method, agnosticism, and secularism, 'human happiness, and human improvement by law and not by caprice', as well as 'liberty, equality, and fraternity in the domain of politics' (Putnam 1894, 12–14). The ever-expanding conception of freethought seemed to permit the inclusion of any figures that Putnam generally found agreeable. Of the early modern Spanish

novelist and author of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes, Putnam wrote, for example: 'He who makes the world happy must, for that very reason, be anti-orthodox. He who creates a smile is, to that extent, a heretic. The very moment a man laughs he is on the road to hell, according to the church's creed' (Putnam 1894, 211).

Unlike many other histories of atheism, Putnam was concerned not just with the major thinkers of any given era, but also with the masses who made up the bulk of atheists and freethinkers. At the end of the book, Putnam included nearly 200 pages of biographical sketches of leading and especially lesser-known freethinkers in the United States from the past century, many of whom he knew personally, as well as a few pages on those from Britain and Europe. His rationale for this sounds as if it belongs in the mid-twentieth century, when historians began focusing more and more on the experiences of ordinary people:

> History to-day has ceased to be a history of kings and princes and so-called great men, and has become a history of the people, and the history of Freethought should also be a history of Freethought people. We need to get acquainted with the rank and file, those soldiers who for many a year carried the colors of Freethought without any official badge. It seems to me that we want to know something about these men and women, whose lives never will be known unless they are known in the pages of this book, and where better can we record them? (Putnam 1894, 683–4)

Another work in this school was the British freethinker and politician J. M. Robertson's massive four-volume *History of Freethought*, originally a shorter history in 1915 (published as *A Short History of Freethought* in two volumes), which was eventually expanded into four volumes in 1929, two on the history of freethought before the French Revolution, and two on freethought in the nineteenth century. Like Watts and Putnam, Robertson was a partisan in the freethought struggle and plainly wrote from this perspective. His work is much more scholarly than these others, however, and it is copiously cited. There is also an encyclopaedic quality to Robertson's work, meaning there are discussions of obscure figures that will be unknown even to specialists, and of places that rarely get mentioned in other histories of atheism, like Iberia or Scandinavia. Robertson attempted to avoid partisanship, criticizing past works on this topic by Christian authors which functioned as 'not so much a history as an indictment'. In his work, by contrast, 'framed though it be from the rationalistic standpoint, it is proposed to draw up not a counter-indictment, but a more or less dispassionate

account of the main historical phases of freethought' (Robertson 1969a, 1:19). Still, there is no doubt that Robertson saw the history as one in which truth fought against untruth. This is clearest when he discussed the end of the Middle Ages, in which 'slowly the wronged and starved instinct for Truth re-asserted itself . . . against the transformed tyranny of the Untrue' (Robertson 1969a, 1:511).

It would, however, be doing a disservice to Robertson to paint his history as merely a straightforwardly triumphalist account of freethought's rise against the forces of the untrue, as Watts' and Putnam's largely were. As he wrote, the history of freethought should be about 'the circumstances under which the species freethinker – rudimentarily visible even in the period of "pre-history," and never absent in the historic period – emerges, multiplies, or dwindles' (Robertson 1969b, 2:607). Robertson took for granted that there was a universal character to freethought, but he was also careful to study the cultural, socioeconomic, and political conditions in which these ideas developed. Freethought, like religion, 'prospers at different times in different degrees relatively to the favourableness of the environment' (Robertson 1969a, 1:46).

He was never explicit about what constituted a favourable or unfavourable environment, but one example of a favourable environment was in cosmopolitan areas where multiple cultures were able to mingle. There, various religious traditions were brought together, forcing comparisons and contrasts among followers. The cross-cultural influence of Asia Minor and North Africa provided fertile ground for the efflorescence of ancient Greece.

Another example of this contextual approach is seen in the Protestant Reformation. Robertson identified its success or failure in different countries not, as was then in vogue, as a result of inherent racial differences between northern and southern Europeans, but of political and historical factors. The ideas of Martin Luther and his ilk were not new, and indeed some of their predecessors had been more theologically radical, but their success was found in the degree to which their ideas could be tied to state power: 'the anti-papal movement succeeded where the balance of political forces could be turned against the clerical interest, and failed where the latter predominated' (Robertson 1969a, 1:477).

Robertson was also interested in places where freethought did not flourish. The aftermath of the French Revolution saw a reversal for freethought, and again Robertson drew here on political and economic factors. Whereas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the upper classes indulged in deism, '[i]n the vast panic which followed on the French Revolution', these classes

'took fright at unbelief as something now visibly connected with democracy and regicide' and they quickly retreated back to orthodoxy. 'Class interest and political prejudice wrought much in both cases; only in opposite directions' (Robertson 1969a, 2:795).

Robertson saw the nineteenth century as critical, particularly the scientific discoveries of geology and evolution, as well as biblical criticism, emanating from Germany in particular, which raised questions about the authenticity and composition of the Bible. (Indeed, Robertson seems to have given greater weight to biblical criticism than science, unlike later works on the history of atheism, which sometimes completely ignore biblical criticism.) These new ideas hollowed out Christianity, leaving it little more than a shell of its former self. Robertson seemed confident that freethought would continue to grow and religion decline, even if he remained aware of the possibility for reversal.

Unlike Putnam's work, which focused almost entirely on the west, Robertson traced freethought from the earliest 'primitive' societies. He admitted the prospects for finding freethinkers there were poor, but 'it is reasonable to surmise that among the more reflective there were some capable of simple atheism or non-belief, and of the prudence of keeping the fact to themselves' (Robertson 1969a, 1:49). His work also contained a lengthy chapter on ancient 'religions' in Asia and the Americas, as well as a section on freethought in Islam. The final volume of Robertson's work also contained discussion of the recent history of freethought in non-western countries, including Japan and Turkey.

Later in the twentieth century came *Western Atheism: A Short History* (2000 [1971]), by James Thrower, then a professor at the University of Ghana and later a professor of religion at the University of Aberdeen.[1] While his work is mostly confined to the west, he is open to the possibility of non-western modes of atheism that are not constrained by time and space. In the afterword to the reprint edition, Thrower wrote, 'atheism has not been, any more than has theology, confined to that [western] tradition. However, the comparative history of atheism remains to be written' (Thrower 2000, 147). Thrower indicated his own interest in doing this, but passed away before this could be undertaken.

[1] Others in this school are more explicit about their views, but the reason for including Thrower in this school is that, aside from his arguments, on the book jacket to the 1971 edition of the work, it is stated that Thrower 'originally intended to enter the church but was cured, he says, by reading theology'. Likewise, in the acknowledgements to that work, Thrower acknowledges 'the *atheoi* themselves' and says that had he not dedicated the book to his parents, 'this short work would surely have been dedicated to them'.

In the book, Thrower identified atheism with naturalism: there was a particular worldview, he said, that 'can be seen as early as the beginning of speculative thought itself, and which I shall call naturalistic, that is atheistic *per se*, in the sense that it is incompatible with any and every form of supernaturalism' (Thrower 2000, 4). He began in antiquity, where he saw the Ionian philosophers as some of the earliest members of this tradition, in that they attempted to find naturalistic explanations for phenomena. This was a theme throughout the ancient period, but Thrower was careful to point out that often these naturalistic critiques of the ancient gods led not to atheism, but to more sophisticated forms of theism. Nonetheless, this period saw many of the arguments that would be drawn upon by later atheists, like scepticism, moral critiques of religion, and attempts to explain religion itself.

Thrower contended that '[t]he significant period for the rise of the secularist attitude in Western Europe is . . . the late Middle Ages and the dissociation of faith and reason . . . which gave rise to the development of physical science as an exclusive and exhaustive way of looking at the world' (Thrower 2000, 3). In Thrower's picture, medieval philosophers like Thomas Aquinas argued that faith and reason were not opposed to one another, but were nonetheless two separate routes to truth; reason could establish some things, while revelation could establish others, and in some cases the two could work in tandem. Later medieval scholars like John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham continued this process of separating faith and reason. Both stressed the limitations of reason to tell us anything about God's existence, meaning that one needed to depend entirely on faith. This meant philosophers turned away from metaphysical speculations and increasingly towards the natural world.

The Renaissance saw the rediscovery of classical works and a shift to viewing humans in a secular context, which helped to prepare the ground for the later emergence of atheism. This was also the time when the sciences began to develop, as phenomena were understood less in terms of their 'final cause' – or their ultimate divine purpose – than their 'efficient cause' – or what brought them into existence. The appearance of comets, for example, might have previously been seen before as portents from God, but by the end of the seventeenth century, thinkers increasingly understood such events as natural phenomena. This would culminate in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, when thinkers like Denis Diderot and d'Holbach constructed a scientific view of the world that had no need for God. As Thrower said, 'The battle was over. Orthodoxy in all but rout. Those who were not out and out atheists had abandoned faith and rested what little religion they had on

reason. Where revelation was admitted it too was accommodated to reason' (Thrower 2000, 99).

The section on the recent history of atheism is very brief. The previous centuries had shown, to Thrower, that attempting to ground faith on reason and natural science had proven 'disastrous', meaning a new method for the nineteenth century was needed. '[Immanuel] Kant shows the way. Others will follow and will seek to establish belief in God not only on moral but also on religious experience' (Thrower 2000, 116). This project was, however, quickly undermined by Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, who themselves proffered naturalistic explanations for religious feeling itself. In this period and into the twentieth century, Thrower focused entirely on philosophers and scientists, and said very little about the widespread decline of religion among the masses.

Writing in a preface to the reprint of the book – nearly three decades after publication – Thrower explained that he wished he had done more then to highlight the positive character of atheism. While atheism began as a negation, 'it becomes, from about the middle of the eighteenth century, more affirmative, offering what the atheist believes to be a truer and more life-enhancing account of the world and of human life within the world than that offered by the theist'. Here, Thrower takes issue with an author in the Christian school, Michael Buckley, discussed in the next section: 'Atheism ceases to be, as Fr. Michael Buckley has claimed, simply "parasitic" on theism' (Thrower 2000, ix).

Mitchell Stephens' *Imagine There's No Heaven: How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World* (2014) is a twenty-first-century representative of the atheist school. Stephens, a journalism professor at New York University, offers a progressive narrative of the development of atheism, though he cautions that it 'certainly does not follow a straight line' (Stephens 2014, 119). In this narrative, religion, an erroneous view of the world arising out of humans' imperfectly evolved brains, is gradually eroded in favour of a naturalistic explanation of the world. Aside from vanquishing religion, these atheists and other religious sceptics 'contributed . . . to what may be humankind's greatest accomplishments: the advancement of knowledge and the expansion of human rights' (Stephens 2014, 2).

Despite the title, Stephens is not interested in only atheism. Like the others in this school, his work is much broader, including forms of unbelief like scepticism and materialism, as well as visions of politics informed by a rejection of religion. As with Robertson, Stephens sees atheism – or rather a sceptical attitude – as existing in almost all times and places. One example of

this is the Charvaka (also discussed by Robertson), who were an ancient sect of Indian materialists who rejected not just gods, but also the soul, the afterlife, and concepts like karma and nirvana. To Stephens, they 'are not the only answer to the argument that atheism is a phenomenon limited to the West' or 'that atheism is a product of modernity, the Enlightenment or the Scientific Revolution', but they 'may be the best answer to these arguments' (Stephens 2014, 7). Other examples of anticlericalism or scepticism towards religious doctrines, if not a coherent theory of atheism, can also be found in pre-modern or non-western societies.

In a similar way to Robertson, Stephens argues for the importance of open societies to the emergence of unbelief. Stephens doesn't really develop a theory of why certain times and places are more conducive to freethought or atheism than others, except to suggest that there are feedback loops in which open societies produce more learning, which in turn lead to a decline of religious superstition and a rise of freethought, followed by more learning and investigation, or, by contrast, closed societies which stifle learning, in turn making it more difficult for the small sparks of scepticism to become alight. This leaves the question, however, of what causes societies to be more or less open in the first place.

Stephens is not only interested in explaining how atheism emerged, but what atheists did once they had given up Christianity. In Stephens' narrative, many of the greatest gains of our times came from non-believers. Could, for example, that massive intellectual project of eighteenth-century France, the *Encyclopédie*, 'have been undertaken ... by individuals who believed all important wisdom had already been inscribed in some ancient holy book?' (Stephens 2014, 128). Moving to the nineteenth century, Stephens argues that the great works of the era by John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin '[p]robably ... had to be written by nonbelievers' (Stephens 2014, 187). Darwin's investigations into evolution or Mill's defence of scepticism towards all received truth could not, in Stephens' view, have been performed by religious individuals. It should be noted, however, that Stephens focuses not only on the towering intellects, but he also, for example, discusses traditions of scepticism among peasants in the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

As we will see when discussing the Christian perspectives below, the horrors of the twentieth century, particularly the mass violence in communist countries, present a problem for triumphalist accounts of the history of atheism. Stephens, however, has an answer for the charge that atheism was responsible for this violence. While these cases cannot be completely

divorced from atheism, Stephens contends that the leaders were in fact more like their religious counterparts than atheists: 'Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot *were* in a sense religious' (Stephens 2014, 221). Their faith in the righteousness of their own interpretation of history, culminating in the inevitability of utopia, was held with an absolute certainty that was more characteristic of religion than the sceptical tradition of atheism. Instead, the twentieth century saw 'a continuation and intensification' of the story of the previous three centuries: 'the spread of learning, particularly training in science, to more places and more levels of society, with a concomitant increase in life expectancy and living standards' (Stephens 2014, 212).

While those like Putnam and Robertson wrote before the advent of works critical of progressive narratives of history, Stephens writes at a time in which many academics are often justifiably allergic to such histories, and he is clearly aware of this. He writes: 'Religion's defenders – along with those postmodern critics of the narrative of religious decline – rebel against any notion of inevitability here, but isn't what is happening becoming clear?' (Stephens 2014, 269). In this sense, then, Stephens sees the upward trend of atheism safely continuing in the future.

Christian/Theological Perspectives

Authors on the Christian or theological side, despite differences between their works, suggest that atheism is not a logical necessity and that therefore one cannot simply assume that it will develop on its own. Rather, they look at the particular conditions under which the idea of atheism could emerge. These include particular philosophical moves made or particular social and political contexts which spurred the growth of atheism. Unlike works of the atheist school, then, these works see atheism as tightly constrained to particular contexts, rather than as a universal phenomenon. These accounts further serve in part as warnings to Christians about what not to do if they wish to halt the growth of atheism.

Early works on the history of atheism were written in Latin in the early eighteenth century (Buddeus 1717; Reimmann 1725), but the first such work in English is by William Van Mildert, an Anglican cleric who would later be the Bishop of Durham. *An Historical View of the Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, given as the Boyle Lectures for 1802–5, is not really a historical account at all. Van Mildert saw infidelity as the work of Satan tempting individuals away from God. The work charts the disobedience of humanity to God before Christianity, and then subsequently the unwillingness of pagans, Jews, and

Muslims to recognize the truth of Christianity. In this wilful rejection of the truth, the Jews for example were described as 'the unceasing agents of Satan' (Van Mildert 1820, 1:264). There is, however, a discussion of the rise of deism, scepticism, and atheism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though it is superficial and lacking any real argument as to why deism flourished then, except to say that being an infidel 'was considered as an almost certain criterion of wit, knowledge, and good-breeding' and therefore 'we cannot but suppose, that, among the vain and superficial, (who constitute always a majority of mankind) great numbers were led astray' (Van Mildert 1820, 1:367–8). Van Mildert saw an important role for the devil in explaining the persistence of infidelity, since how else could one account for unbelief, 'unless we suppose [man] to be urged by a seducing Spirit, full of envy, deceit, and malice, to rush upon his own destruction?' (Van Mildert 1820, 1:428–9). Needless to say, this historiographical perspective is not widely adopted today.

Later in the nineteenth century came the Anglican clergyman and academic Adam Storey Farrar's *Critical History of Free Thought in Reference to the Christian Religion* (1862), which was originally given as the Christian-themed Bampton Lectures, delivered at Oxford University. While the work is openly apologetic, it is nonetheless a naturalistic history in contrast to that of Van Mildert. As with some of the earlier works from an atheist or freethought perspective, Farrar's work is obviously much broader than simply a history of atheism, but nonetheless contains some of the same themes as later histories.

Farrar's stated purpose was to understand doubt and unbelief of Christianity as a way to defend the doctrines and instruct Christians, but also 'creating deep pity for the sinner, united with hatred for the sin' (Farrar 1862, xli). This is not to say that his work is obviously unfair to freethinkers; indeed, he professed that 'his aim has been not to allow his opinions to warp his view of the facts. History ought to be written with the same spirit of cold analysis which belongs to science' (Farrar 1862, xiii).

He argued that there were both emotional and intellectual reasons why people turned to unbelief. In the work, he mostly focused on the intellectual, although at points he speculated on the personal character of individuals as potential reasons explaining their unbelief. Farrar's work was far from simply condemnatory, however, and it adopted an almost dialectical approach which we will see taken up by later works. In this perspective, individuals reacted to new methods or new discoveries, which spurred doubt or unbelief; this in turn called forth Christians to respond, and '[w]hatever is evil is eliminated in the conflict; whatever is good is retained. Under the overruling

of a beneficent Providence, antagonism is made the law of human progress' (Farrar 1862, 16). In this dialectical process, Christianity invariably came out stronger, though it also meant that freethinkers could not be seen as wholly evil since they contributed, if indirectly, to the providential refinement of the faith.

Farrar was also interested in understanding the philosophical, political, and social contexts in which freethought developed, while also leaving room for the importance of individuals. He had no illusions about the failings of the church and how they could at times account for the rise of unbelief. He spoke, for example, of the corruption and poor morals of the late medieval church and its clergy, which led people to begin to doubt Christianity altogether. There is undoubtedly an anti-Catholic bent to some of this. As Farrar argued: 'The two great crises in church history' – namely the Italian Renaissance and the rise of atheism in eighteenth-century France – 'have been in Romish countries'. This helped, in his view, to refute 'the attack which has frequently been made on Protestantism, as the cause of eclecticism and unbelief' (Farrar 1862, 136).

The contextual approach, as we will see again in a later work in this school, can be glimpsed most clearly in the comparison of Britain and France in the eighteenth century. Why did deism in Britain mostly die away by the end of the century, while in France it flourished? 'The answer to this question must be sought in the antecedent history. It is a phenomenon political rather than intellectual. It depended upon the soil in which the seed was sown, not on the inherent qualities of the seed itself' (Farrar 1862, 230). Farrar explained the close links between church and state in France, which mutually reinforced despotic rule that would in turn give rise to unbelief as a protest. While Farrar attributed the growth of deism and atheism in France partly to individual 'faults of character' (Farrar 1862, 272), there was also a warning for the church from this history: 'not to endanger the everlasting Gospel of the Son of God by making it the buttress to support corrupt political and ecclesiastical institutions' (Farrar 1862, 273).

Indeed, at times Farrar was even supportive of freethought's role in fighting such oppression. When, for example, the Catholic Church persecuted Galileo for his defence of heliocentrism, 'it has been to free thought that we owe the emancipation of the human mind' (Farrar 1862, 493). In general, Farrar was strongly against the use of repression to enforce Christianity. He was confident that the strength of Christian arguments meant they would ultimately prevail against challenges. The gains resulting from, for example, the new movement of biblical criticism coming from

Germany showed the value of free inquiry, and that Christians should not fear it: 'Christianity is not a religion that need shrink from investigation' (Farrar 1862, 405).

Moving into the twentieth century, this contextual and dialectical approach is continued by Michael Buckley, a Jesuit theologian, in his two works on the history of atheism, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (1987) and *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (2004). The first looks at how and why atheism emerged in the early modern period and the second is a reflection of some of these lessons for modern times.

In contrast to works of the previous school, which interpret atheism more broadly, Buckley contends that 'atheism is essentially parasitic' on theism (Buckley 1987, 15). This means that Buckley's focus is on how theists' argumentation allowed for atheism to come about. As he explains, '[a]ny attention to the origins of atheism in the West must attend as much – if not more – to the theism of the theologians and philosophers as to the atheism of their adversaries' (Buckley 1987, 16). Atheism was not, therefore, self-caused, but emerged in reaction to moves theologians themselves made.

For Buckley, the fatal mistake came in the early seventeenth century, when theologians like Leonard Lessius and Marin Mersenne made rational arguments against atheists in favour of God's existence. The problem with such a strategy, to Buckley, was that their arguments were not grounded in revelation or the figure of Jesus, but abstract arguments about God. Buckley ultimately laments that, 'Christianity entered into the defense of the existence of the Christian god without appeal to anything Christian' (Buckley 1987, 67).

Bigger names, like René Descartes and Isaac Newton, while seemingly providing arguments for theism, likewise undercut it. Descartes started at a point of absolute scepticism to reason his way to God's existence, which in turn grounded the possibility of all human knowledge about the world. Newton meanwhile developed a universal mechanics that necessitated God's continual presence. But these philosophical arguments provided tools which eighteenth-century atheists like Diderot and d'Holbach deployed to completely expunge God from the universe by arguing that motion and sensibility were inherent properties of matter, meaning that there was no need for a God to give sense to this system.

Buckley's message ultimately seems to be that Christians made a grave error by suggesting that reason and empiricism were the only sure grounds of knowledge of God, which tacitly admitted that revelation or personal experience of God were not to be trusted on their own: 'In failing to assert its own

competence, in commissioning philosophy with its defense, religion shaped its own eventual negation' (Buckley 1987, 357). Had Christians defended God differently, atheism might never have gotten off the ground in the first place.

Buckley continues the dialectical approach in his second historical work on atheism. There he identifies similar patterns in the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, thinkers like Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher increasingly placed humans at the centre of understanding God. For human flourishing to take place and for a coherent system of ethics to be possible, they argued, God was necessary. By the middle and particularly the end of the century, however, atheist thinkers had turned this idea on its head. Thinkers like Feuerbach, Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud all contended in various ways that the idea of God presented a crucial obstacle to human flourishing and only by removing him could this truly take place. Like his first book, then, Buckley sees problematic defences of God unwittingly opening the way to atheism.

The Lancaster theology lecturer Gavin Hyman's *A Short History of Atheism* (2010) relies heavily on Buckley and other theologians, although expands and amplifies the thrust of their arguments that atheism emerged not out of itself, but out of conditions unintentionally set up by Christians. For Hyman, as for Buckley, atheism is parasitic upon theism. Atheism 'did not arise autonomously as an independent mode of thought, but emerged as a result of certain intellectual moves within theology and resulting changes in the prevailing conception of theism' (Hyman 2010, 79).

The argument runs that in the medieval period, God was conceived of differently. In this time, humans were thought of as the passive objects of God's actions, in contrast to modern understandings which saw humans as the active subjects who could perceive and act upon the world around them. In this period, the philosopher Thomas Aquinas argued that God existed on a different level of 'being' from humans and the rest of creation, though God was still approachable to humans through analogical language. This began to change in the early fourteenth century with the thought of the philosopher John Duns Scotus, who argued that there was no fundamental difference between God and creation, as Aquinas thought; God existed with humans and the rest of creation on the same plane of 'being', although God was infinitely greater than humans. As Hyman explains, this had a two-fold consequence: 'God is brought closer to creatures insofar as he exists in the same way as them (though with greater intensity), but is also moved further away from them insofar as they are now divided by an abyss that can no longer be crossed by means of analogical participation' (Hyman 2010, 71).

Picking up on Buckley's ideas, Hyman traces the story into the early modern period, when theologians increasingly sought certainty with regard to God and subordinated themselves to science and philosophy. As he explains, '[t]he more that religion adapted itself to modern epistemological assumptions and procedures, the more vulnerable it became to an atheistic assault' (Hyman 2010, xix). Indeed, '[i]t is not difficult to see how, in such a world, atheism becomes inevitable' (Hyman 2010, 79).

Modern ways of thinking of God as a 'big person' and more generally of the Scriptures as seeking to offer an accurate account of the creation of the universe opened the door to atheism. In Hyman's narrative, this vulnerability became most apparent in the nineteenth century. This came in three main forms: biblical criticism, scientific discoveries about evolution and the age of the earth, and concerns about the immorality of various Christian doctrines like eternal punishment for non-believers. 'Had theism not taken this distinctively modern turn', Hyman reflects, 'it is unlikely that these three factors would have been as damaging to theism as in fact they were' (Hyman 2010, 82).

All is not lost, however. Since atheism denies a particularly modern form of God, now that we have, apparently, entered postmodernity, such denials no longer hold water: 'does the end of modernity bring with it the end of atheism? Emphatically yes, if by atheism we mean a specifically modern atheism' (Hyman 2010, 184). In the final chapter, Hyman devotes considerable space to contemporary theologians who also reject the modern idea of God as an idol and instead variously posit, for example, that perhaps God might better be understood as a verb rather than a noun, or that God could be understood in a similar way to how we think of a concept like 'colour'. 'With the eclipse of modernity', Hyman argues, 'we see also the eclipse of this modern God, with the result that modern atheism comes increasingly to appear as a chimera, trenchantly denying a concept that few now would wish to affirm, not even many of those who wish to define themselves as theists' (Hyman 2010, 177). Hyman accepts that in the postmodern world, atheists would be free to reject these postmodern conceptions of God as vacuous or nonsensical, but they could not reject them on empirical or scientific grounds, as they would have done with modern conceptions. One might counter that while these new, 'sophisticated' conceptions of God might be gaining ground among theologians, it is difficult to imagine them being accepted among most average believers today.

As with Buckley, Hyman focuses entirely on modern atheism, and entirely on the west, again making the point that atheism is not something universal,

but that it is limited to a particular context. Furthermore, again like Buckley, much of the work is devoted to Christians rather than atheists. Unlike works in the atheist school, these works are concerned with the *idea* of atheism, rather than atheists themselves.

The Oxford theologian Alister McGrath's *Twilight of Atheism* (2004) lacks the scholarship of the other books and is a mostly polemical account, designed to show the worst historical aspects of atheism, particularly the horrors of the Soviet Union, as well as the sordid tales of individual characters like the Marquis de Sade or Madalyn Murray O'Hair. The book is loaded with sentences seeking to warn of the dangers of atheism. For example: 'While some continue to argue that Auschwitz disproves the existence of God, many more would argue that it demonstrates the depths to which humanity, unrestrained by any thought or fear of God, will sink' (McGrath 2004, 184).

Like the other works of this group, McGrath believes that modernity and atheism are tied up. He sees 1789 – the start of the French Revolution – and 1989 – the fall of the Berlin Wall signalling the end of the Soviet Union – as the dates bookending atheism's rise and fall. Modernity is characterized by a supreme confidence in human reason: 'Atheism was perfectly suited to this rational and logical worldview. It was the established religion of modernity' (McGrath 2004, 221). He also highlights the ways in which Christians have inadvertently brought on atheism, either through their theological arguments – here taking his cue in part from Buckley – or through the close links between the church and political power, which often produced an atheist reaction out of protest.

Unlike Buckley and mostly unlike Hyman, McGrath gives the Reformation an important role in sowing the seeds of atheism, even though he himself is a Protestant. This was through the Reformers' insistence on removing the sacred presence from the natural world. God could not be encountered directly, they contended, but only through reading and interpreting the Scriptures. Furthermore, their hostility to anything that smacked of idol worship led them to denude churches of all images and decoration. All of this had the impact of making God seem more and more distant from humans' immediate experience. This is why, to McGrath, forms of Protestantism, like Pentecostalism, which eschew the austerity of other forms and emphasize direct connection with God, have been growing in recent decades.

Because atheism is so bound up with modernity, McGrath, like Hyman, takes comfort that with the dawn of postmodernity, atheism too will decline. 'Atheism', McGrath writes, 'once seen as Western culture's hot date with the

future, is now seen as an embarrassing link with a largely discredited past' (McGrath 2004, 174). McGrath asserts that atheism is on the decline, but this seems unwarranted in retrospect, given that the years immediately after his book's release have seen an unprecedented efflorescence of atheism and other forms of non-religion.

Taking a different tack is Nick Spencer, the research director of the Christian think tank Theos, in his *Atheists: The Origin of the Species* (2014), which focuses less than the others on theology and more on the social and political factors that have helped to produce atheism. The work therefore in some ways harks back to Farrar's mid-nineteenth-century contribution. Like the others of this school, Spencer argues for a dialectical account of atheism, in which it does not grow on its own, but through particular historical conditions. Spencer argues that 'modern atheism was primarily a political and social cause, its development in Europe having rather more to do with the (ab)use of theologically legitimized political authority than it does with later developments in science or philosophy' (Spencer 2014, xiv–xv).

Because of the diversity of atheism, and the different contexts it arises in, Spencer also contends that we should 'talk about atheisms rather than atheism' (Spencer 2014, xviii). Unlike the others in this school, he also argues that '[a]theism is not an exclusively modern or Western phenomenon. The classical world had its non-believers, as does the non-Western one', although he does not explore these alternative forms in his own work (Spencer 2014, xix).

Spencer points out the profound political implications that came from making atheistic claims, which often served to undercut traditional authorities and which opened the way to imagining new moral or political systems. In this, he disagrees with those like Buckley or Hyman, who see atheism as purely parasitic or negative. It was not until the eighteenth century when people began to profess and articulate a coherent atheism. This was in France, where 'royal absolutism and ecclesiastical authority' were more closely linked than anywhere else in Europe and where there was 'no tradition of a moderate, demonstrably Christian enlightenment' that might redirect atheistic sentiments (Spencer 2014, 92–3). This repressive context emboldened professed atheists like Baron d'Holbach to be uncompromising in their attacks against religion and the state, and to devise radical, new political systems. These eighteenth-century atheists' religious radicalism went hand-in-hand with their political radicalism. Indeed, the well-known phrase about the desire to see the last king hanged with the entrails of the last

priest came from the early eighteenth-century atheist Jean Meslier and was popularized by Denis Diderot.

In contrast, many deists in eighteenth-century Britain, a country that gave greater leeway to unorthodox views than France, did not become full-blown atheists like their French cousins. 'In different circumstances', Spencer writes, 'any number of those loosely accused of atheism . . . might have become atheists. Yet, they did not and the reason they did not is that the Christian establishment was too flexible and accommodating, intellectually and politically, to give them reason to' (Spencer 2014, 86). While hardly a bastion of open thought, Britain was nonetheless more tolerant than most of its European counterparts.

The trend of British moderation blunting the growth of atheism continues throughout the book. Spencer is, however, careful not 'to draw the differences too strongly' between France and Britain and noted some examples of British atheism prior to the French Revolution (Spencer 2014, 160). The British overreaction to that revolution meant a crackdown on dissent, which paradoxically helped to spur the atheist movement in the nineteenth century. Indeed, many of those in Britain jailed for blasphemy would come out even more radical than before. The working-class secularist movement reached its height in the 1880s, as its leader, Charles Bradlaugh, fought to take his seat in Parliament despite his irreligion, but the masses never turned to outright atheism 'largely because the nation was willing to accommodate heartfelt atheism, like Bradlaugh's, within its structures' (Spencer 2014, 194).

As we saw above in the atheist school, the experience of enforced atheism in the Soviet Union represents an aberration to the history of atheism; for Spencer – and for McGrath – the culmination of the atheist political project is in the Soviet Union. Russia, much like eighteenth-century France, possessed a closely linked church and monarchy, which encouraged the growth of a form of radical atheism in the nineteenth century that came to fruition in Lenin's (and his successors') attempts to extirpate religion in the twentieth century.

Spencer's dialectical argument continues with the present day as well. With the growing strength of the religious right in the United States or the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, there has been a corresponding rise in the number of professed atheists in the western world. This is a trend that, as in the other cases, resulted from 'aggressively politicized religion – always atheism's best recruiting sergeant' (Spencer 2014, 253).

Conclusion

This chapter has identified some of the central areas of debate in writing the history of atheism. The division between atheist and Christian perspectives is admittedly somewhat contrived, but I believe that it helps to shine a light on some of the important questions in the field. One such question was how one should define atheism and where and when it can be said to have come about. As we saw, the atheist school generally took a broader view of this question, considering atheism as part of a larger category of freethought, rationalism, or scepticism. With this in mind, many of these authors were willing to see atheism as not simply confined to a particular time and space, but, at least potentially, as a universal phenomenon. They acknowledge that the relative strength of the atheist or freethought perspective does differ over time, and, even if one grants that atheism is 'correct', the question remains why it was more widely held in some places and times than others. Additionally, these historians saw atheism as something constructive, enabling the imagination of new ideas that transcended traditional dogmas. Looking to the future, these writers saw the trend-line of atheism continuing upward.

Those on the Christian or theological side by contrast mostly took a narrow view of atheism as being solely a negation of theism. Sometimes this meant an exclusive focus on the idea of atheism – or indeed, on Christian ideas that took a wrong turn – without examining the lives of actual atheists. In this perspective, atheism became something much more constrained to a particular context, in this case the modern west. Authors differed in their emphasis on why a certain context developed atheism: in some cases, the philosophical scaffolding erected by Christians proved fatal; in others, it was repressive political and social conditions that encouraged the growth of atheism. To these authors, the fact that atheism seems confined to certain contexts means that we need not assume that atheism will always exist in the future.

There is much value to be found in the perspective from both sides, and the argument here is not that one is necessarily better or more scholarly than the other. One criticism, however, that can be applied to nearly all of the works considered here is that they focus only on the 'big names'. As we saw, one of the lone voices against this was Samuel Porter Putnam, who collected individual biographies of lesser-known figures, though these were not woven into any kind of narrative. In the future, one of the biggest challenges will be how to integrate the stories of the great men and women and the great ideas with those of the masses, the everyday, living-and-breathing atheists; in other

words, how to integrate social and cultural history with intellectual and philosophical history. This suggests that the definitive work on the history of atheism still remains to be written.

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3

Israel and the Near East

JACO GERICKE

Introduction

What can be said about Israel and the Near East in the history of atheism? One way to approach this question is to take a step back and look at some of the presuppositions, problems, and perspectives involved in the genealogy of the specific scholarly concepts, concerns, and categories in the associated research. In other words, the history of atheism in relation to Israel and the Near East is also itself an idea with a history, a more concise reconstruction of which is long overdue. I shall do so with a brief summary of a selection of assorted nuances characterizing the literature on the subject.

First, perhaps trivially, scholars whose writings explicitly refer to 'atheism' in the contexts of Israel and the Near East are, for the most part, concerned with the *ancient* world – that is, ancient Israel and the ancient Near East.

Second, the distinction between 'Israel' and the 'Near East' – instead of just discussing the Near East, Israel by default included – generally assumes the former to be the primary focus of the research, which seeks to understand it in relation to the latter as a secondary concern.

Third, research on Israel and the Near East that mentions 'atheism' is usually interested in ancient Israelite *religion*, and that comparatively understood, rather than about other cultural artefacts and irrespective of the type and topic of the study within which the said reference is to be found.

Fourth, most discussion of 'atheism' and ancient Israelite religion appears in biblical (Hebrew Bible/Old Testament) scholarship rather than in the scientific study or philosophical approaches to religion.

Fifth, mainstream biblical scholars, even when referring to ancient Israel, distinguish between Israelite religious beliefs and practices as it would have appeared to a hypothetical time-traveller and the religion of 'Israel' as represented in the world of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament texts.

Sixth, though it is common practice to refer to 'Israel' as a singular religion, the 'intra-religious' diversity in the history of this 'religion' and theological pluralism within the Old Testament texts warrants the assumptions that at the very least one is dealing with *Israelite religions*, much of which within the Old Testament are technically not Israelite in the sense of a united monarchy or northern-kingdom pre-exilic religious context (e.g. early Iron Age origins of Yhwh in the pre-monarchic period, southern kingdom Jerusalem theology and post-exilic Yehud (Judah as a province of Persia), and diasporic religious diversity (Babylonia, Alexandria, and elsewhere)).

Seventh, irrespective of what one believes about concepts of deity explicitly rejected by atheists, here the concern is not with theism/atheism in the world in front of the text but with the god Yhwh as a literary artefact who exists in the world of the text despite having the ontological status of a fictional entity.

Eighth, whether with reference to Yhwh (or other related divine names positively used) or other conceptions of the divine in the Old Testament, the discussion of atheism related to 'Israel' in the world of the text has to deal with relative divine personal identity over time and across possible worlds of the text.

Ninth, the discussion of atheism in the Old Testament is not unrelated to discussions of the nature of theism therein, with conceptions of 'God' and their rejection in any given text complicated by constraints of what is legitimately inferable in the context of particular genres, functional metaphors in the religious language, non-philosophical format, text-critical uncertainties, incoherencies of form and content as a result of composition and redaction histories, and, of course, the indeterminacy of translation.

Tenth, no research concerned with the clarification of the meaning of atheism in ancient Israelite religion simply mirrors the first-order religious language in the biblical texts and instead has to operate with second-order discourse, the terms of which are not actually present in ancient Hebrew/Aramaic (e.g. 'history', 'religion', 'theology', 'belief', 'existence').

All these need to be kept in mind from here onwards. Helpful background for non-specialists can be found in the writings of Barr (1999) on the concept of Old Testament theology (and how this relates to all the variables above). I shall take the nuances and distinctions for granted even when using language otherwise unavoidably lacking in specificity, appearing as generalization and oversimplification, or even at times technically incorrect when referring to specific entities in the text (e.g. consistently referring to Yhwh as the name for the deity in the Old Testament) (cf. Davies 1992). That being

said, given these characteristics of what the reader will encounter when first introduced to research on how 'Israel and the Near East' fits into the history of atheism, this chapter will both proceed from a point presupposing such a state of affairs but also attempt to advance beyond its perceived limitations (cf. Thrower 1980; Anderson 1999, 225–39).

The first part will start with an overview of the modern history of biblical scholarly constructions of the concept of atheism in ancient Israel. In the second part, additional specificity, nuance, comprehensiveness, and depth will be provided by way of what could be called Old Testament atheology. Interestingly, both parts represent original research to a degree rather uncommon in an academic discipline where there is little new under the sun. Not a single publication exists that is exclusively focused on the history of the concept of atheism in the history of Old Testament interpretation. Moreover, up to this point no attempt has been made to expand the theoretical framework with which atheism is not only constructed in scholarly discourse but also approached as a topic when analysing the nature and meaning of first-order religious language in the biblical texts themselves. Doing so is also something not to be confused with an atheistic critique of the Old Testament, of faith-based Old Testament scholarship, a study of atheism among Old Testament scholars, or a look at the reception history of the Old Testament in the writings of atheists, old and new. Instead, the discussion to follow is assumed to supplement and complement such related but different research foci (cf. Avalos 2007; Berlinerblau 2005).

A Brief History of Constructing Atheism in the Old Testament

In this section, the samples used to illustrate trends in the recent (modern) history of biblical interpretation will be provided from those contexts most representative of where the associated references to atheism can be found. These include Hebrew lexicons, histories of Israelite religion, comparative studies involving ancient Near Eastern counterparts, commentaries on certain Old Testament books, and theologies of the Old Testament. To start with, it is interesting to remember that before the Old Testament (from here on assumed also as in the popular but technical format known as the 'Hebrew Bible') was read in dialogue with texts from Mesopotamia and Ugarit, among others, scholars of 'the early history of God' used pre-Islamic Arabic beliefs as reconstructed from interaction with nomads in the deserts of the Arabian

Peninsula. Initially it was popular to follow Wellhausen's classification of camel-herding Bedouin as what these days goes by the term 'apatheism':

> The man is an individual, his help is in his arm and his brother, no God assists him, no saint watches over his soul. His highest personal good is his honor, for the sake of which he forces his soul to venture what it dreads.
>
> (Wellhausen 1897, 228)

After Wellhausen, the religion of early Israel came to be seen not as theism, but as animism and/or polydaemonism. By the former was meant the idea that everything is somehow alive (i.e. animated, and not, as *prima facie* would seem to lay readers, the worship of animals). By the latter was meant a belief in spirits, associated with external (as air, wind seen to vitalize natural phenomena) and internal forces (e.g. air as breath, which changes as one expresses emotions, abilities). This view was based on a specific reconstruction of the history of religion that was seen as beginning with 'crude' disjointed ideas about what is what and why (i.e. related to causes), and developing through ever more sophisticated stages before becoming pantheism, polytheism, henotheism, monolatrism, monotheism, and so on. While all elements involved are obviously attested in one way or another, the evolutionary scheme as progression from pagan superstition to an ending in classical philosophical theism is now seen as itself very much a metanarrative of supersession told from the view of the modern Christian reader. That being said, such elements can be described as 'atheistic' not in the sense of apatheistic or anti-theistic, but as non-theistic, to the extent that the latter category is assumed as a form of negative, weak, and soft atheism. The existence of gods is not denied, but a belief in their existence is absent.

Nowadays, mainstream Old Testament scholarship and those working on the history of Israelite religions from within this disciplinary milieu would suggest that theism was always present by default. But things are complicated by two facts. First, the words for 'god' as common noun or generic term could include not only Yhwh as creator of the world but Yhwh as storm god, god of tribes and state, as well as the gods of other nations, ancestors, the king, the dead, powerful individuals, members of a divine council, divine messengers, etc. Second, what was included as being a god, and what a god was assumed to be like vary in different texts of the same era (different theologies) and the same/different versions of the same tradition at another time (thus Yhwh in the Old Testament does not refer to one entity with a clearly definable nature and attributes or relations to the world and things in the world). This complicates any discussion of atheism in Israel or the Old

Testament in the sense that the relative identity of atheism is supervened on by the relative identity of theism, the latter times also amounting to an implicit narrow 'atheism' in relation to those varieties of theistic belief that contradict it (beyond the sense in which metaphorical religious language and characters of fiction are allowed to contradict) (cf. Van der Toorn 1999, 311–19; Gericke 2017).

The aforementioned considerations rarely feature in discussions of the Old Testament in relation to atheism (by biblical scholars). The concern is mostly limited to how to perceive unity in diversity, different voices in the text, theological pluralism, scepticism in wisdom texts and popular religion, as well as polemical tensions in the history of Israelite religion and ideology supervening on the composition and redaction of biblical texts. More will be said on what else could be noted with these in mind and how they could relate to the typology of atheism. For the present, the focus will be on what Old Testament scholars have explicitly discussed about atheism and its nature in the world of the text.

References to atheism in the history of Old Testament interpretation are too numerous and difficult to discuss in the confines of the present chapter; consequently, we shall focus on popular distinct samples that cover the range of associative and attributive meanings and the texts and contexts, both biblical and scholarly, only cursively and eclectically to obtain a sufficient introductory overview of what is there, before adding some additional perspectives on what could also be added to the discussion. Those chosen are what is indicated by algorithms as the most cited and consulted literature featuring explicit references to 'atheism' or 'atheists' by biblical scholars over the last three centuries. Included are, among others, popular Hebrew lexicons/dictionaries and detailed commentaries on the associated texts in Old Testament theology and the history of Israelite religion.

The first sample to be discussed comes from the German Hebraist Gesenius (Gesenius 1827). This source is noted because it seems to represent the earliest clearly identifiable resource for which Hebrew words and biblical verses were assumed to suffice on those rare occasions when Old Testament scholars mention and illustrate atheism and the form it is said to have taken in the world of the text. The first can be found in the entry for the root *nbl* (Hebrew noun, 'fool'), which is connected to atheism in the context of Psalm 14:1 (with a parallel in 53:1). The Psalm itself is not discussed, only the chapter and verse number are cited; lexicons of this type could not possibly also be commentaries and stick to the plot and more will be said on this particular text in context after the literature review.

Suffice it to note that the lexicon's implied link between unbelief and immorality (ethical associations) and ignorance (epistemic associations) can be found in the Psalm itself and is visible in the translation of the surrounding wording, which has a complicated redaction history and thus contains problems in conceptual continuity. The choice of Psalm 14 for the entry and the need to include 'atheism' in the extension of 'the fool' in a lexicon (irrespective of its assumed membership) is interesting. So is the way the author of the entry sought to offer additional confirmation by mentioning that the Arabic word of the same root refers to someone who is an 'atheist, unbelieving, wicked' (without referencing the quote or dating such use). This reflects the practice of the day, whereby ancient Israelite religion was already being compared to, contrasted with, and clarified by ancient Near Eastern sources, the latter frequently involving pre-Islamic Arabic sources (oral and written) before others (Sumerian, Egyptian, Akkadian/Babylonian/Assyrian, Ugaritic, Hittite, and others would become more popular).

Another Old Testament text that this edition associates with 'atheism', and which would also become popular for doing so, is Job 2:10. Again the word 'atheism' does not actually appear and there is not even an explicit remark on whether or not there is a god/are gods. What has no direct Hebrew equivalent term but is again a second-order discourse construction is the use of the adjective 'foolish' by the character of Job when addressing his wife, who he criticizes for speaking like a 'foolish woman'. In the narrative she (who is not named), on seeing her husband suffer, urges him to 'curse' (the Hebrew has 'bless' as a euphemism) God and die. How exactly one can infer the presence of atheism from this is unclear (unless atheism is equated with impiety in the classical Greek sense of the word). The verbal link to the root of the word for the 'fool' used in the Psalm (and in numerous other texts) cannot be considered a sufficient condition for doing so. Be that as it may, Job 2:10 would come to serve as another popular biblical reference which is merely listed rather than discussed when Old Testament scholars (critical and conservative) remark on atheism in relation to the religious language used in the world of the text.

After lexicographers noted the presence of 'atheism' (in the modern sense of 'unbelief' combined with the older sense of 'impiety') present in Psalms 14 and 53, irrespective of whether Job 2:10 was mentioned as a supplement, additional distinctions and qualifications by conservative and critical Old Testament scholars were soon added. In the example of a conservative reading chosen to illustrate this point, we may note the well-known German biblical scholar Delitzsch, who in his commentary on the Psalter seems to have responded to what by implication was an already existing attempt to add nuance and specificity (whether for apologetic, historical or other reasons) to the concept of

atheism used to classify the variety of unbelief attributed to 'the fool' (Delitzsch 1871 [1859], 104). The English translation of Delitzsch's German sees the commentator insisting that it is 'not merely practical atheism' that we encounter in Psalm 14 in the reference to the fool's 'maxim' (a problematic translation of the German 'inwendigen Aussage' or 'internal statement'). Instead, according to the commentator, we have nothing less than 'theoretical' unbelief because 'Hebrew conceptions' of the person thought of the heart as being as much the seat of thinking as of willing.

From the above we can infer the projected and polemical nature of the early critical qualifications and classifications of the nature of atheism or unbelief that was present in the interpretation of Delitzsch's implied exegetical opponent – that is, the caricature of a closet atheistic type of 'liberal' or 'critical' scholar (as opposed to a true believing 'conservative' one). On this view, the atheism present is 'merely practical' and limited to a 'wilful' rather than 'thoughtful' denial that there is a God (i.e. believing there is a god and only rebelling or living as if there is none). Also, the need to refer to 'Hebrew' anthropology (in the systematic theological sense of biblical ideas about human constitution, not the academic discipline) already presupposes a distinction from other conceptions, most likely those of theology's 'frenemy', 'Greek philosophy'. This would explain the classification of the atheism involved as of the practical kind only, since theoretical varieties would have seemed to require far too much philosophical-type reasoning or metaphysical speculation than seems contextually possible (which in itself is still apologetic, only that of a more historically conscious liberal theology). In this critical reading as well, then, the sense of 'atheism' is distinctly modern, not only because of the theoretical/practical distinction, but also evident in assuming that atheism refers primarily to beliefs (the contemporary focus) before linking it to impiety (the early reference of the term).

Another interesting factoid is that 'practical atheism' seems to be the précising definition of choice when it comes to any association of the Old Testament texts with atheism. Usually, such atheism is only ever attributed to antagonists, which is taken to mean they either live as if there is no divine being in general or Yhwh in particular. In his *Old Testament Theology or the History of the Hebrew Religion from 800 B.C.*, Duff assumed it descriptively apt to refer to 'practical atheism' as an object of astonishment for the prophet Micah (in the context of verse 7 of chapter 2 of the book of the same name) as regards his 'astonishment at such *practical atheism*' (Duff 1891, 300). This descriptive is considered apt in light of the theodicy construed as present in the rhetorical question asked by the character of the deity. It concerns the problem of whether the evil happening is of divine origin and whether Yhwh does in fact act justly, that is, reward those who do good. The use

of the term 'practical atheism' by the author appears to have been motivated by what is understood to be the rejected belief that the divine is causally related to evil and that Yahwistic religious language attributing the property of being good (just) to Yhwh was felt to be meaningless in light of the reality of the particular situation.

The next sample comes again from a history of Israelite religion. More specifically, from the English translation of the German publication, popularly known as *The Religion of Revelation in Its Pre-Christian Stage of Development* (Schultz 1892). The context of the reference is again in regard to Psalm 14, mentioned earlier. Again, the readerly ideology is more conservative, insisting that: 'the Old Testament knows, and that in Psalms which are certainly not among the latest, of persons who say "There is no God"' (Schultz 1892, 102). The more critical qualification and opposing of Hebrew (biblical) and Greek (philosophical) thinking then follows in asserting that this 'atheism' is not that of 'theoretical atheists for whom the existence of God might and should be formally proved' (Schultz 1892, 102).

A very influential Scandinavian scholar, Johannes Pedersen, though in biblical theology (1930–60) frequently relied on, has been forgotten as insisting that the undifferentiated, unified culture of earliest Israel possessed no belief in a personal God, but concentrated all its faith on the will and abilities of magically endowed men (Fohrer 1972). This bit of Pedersen was not accepted by Old Testament theologians, who since then had felt the need to mention that Yhwh was personal without fail. The popular view at the time can be summarized with a quotation from another Old Testament theologian/historian of Israelite religion who concludes at the end of his assessment that the world of the text refers to 'practical atheism' (only),

> They no more questioned his being than they questioned the reality of the world around themselves. The philosopher may raise doubts about the reality of all things, but the plain man is content to base his belief in the reality of the world on his experience, however illusionary the philosopher may tell him it is. So the Hebrew was content to base his belief in the existence of God on what seemed to him to be his experience of God, granted to himself or to his people, and especially on the experience of God given to the nation in the great moments of its history . . . He (God) was a postulate of experience rather than thought . . . No man who hears the roar of the lion near him will turn to philosophy to ask whether there is any such objective reality as the lion, and no man who has had an experience of God is concerned to ask whether the philosopher will allow him to believe in God. Where we find atheism in the Old Testament it is a practical rather than theoretical atheism. (Rowley 1956, 48–9)

Recourse to the practical/theoretical atheism distinction and linking the Old Testament and ancient Israelite religion only with the former, and then in the modern sense of unbelief (the 'practical' suffices to link it with immorality and impiety), exponentially increased from the middle of the twentieth century onward. Motivating it is, initially, the so-called Biblical Theology Movement's dislike of discussing the biblical texts as revealed theology in relation to natural theology. Another motivation was historical – second-order thinking in ancient Israelite religions could not (and was not permitted to) be so easily linked to later Jewish and Christian philosophical-theological ways of reasoning. Another was linguistic and literary-critical, the emphasis being on the metaphorical and even mythological (again, as opposed to the philosophical) nature of the Old Testament's religious language. Yet another was the ever-present dichotomy between Hebrew thought as practical, ethical, and concrete and Greek thought as theoretical, metaphysical, and abstract. These considerations lie behind brief remarks on Old Testament assumptions about the existence of deity like the following (again an English translation from a German source text):

> The assumption that God exists is the Old Testament's greatest gift to mankind. In the Old Testament God's existence is entirely a foregone conclusion, always presupposed; reference is continually being made to it; it is never denied or questioned. The fool says in his heart 'there is no God', Ps. 14, 1, Ps. 53, 1, and the foolish women may speak like that (Job 2, 10); or man may deny Him and say 'this is not He', Jer. 5, 12. But these are the words of people who are lacking in understanding, so lacking that they can be described in the same breath as corrupt and having done abominable works. They speak like that not in order to deny God but in order to evade His judgment and His claims upon them. They call in question His action as it affects their lives, but they do not call in question His existence. It is practical atheism, as the sinner practises it; not theoretical atheism. The latter is unknown to the Old Testament.
>
> (Köhler 1957, 19)

Note that according to this popular view, the belief in God's existence is an 'assumption', not the product of reasoning to a conclusion or critical reflection whatsoever. Though the scholarship is otherwise refreshingly open-minded, and while this may be seen as merely a descriptive remark about historical beliefs, the inability to look beyond the words to their conditions of possibility (not to mention the fact that they are caricatures of their theistic opponents) are all clearly present. This is to the point where the denial of the presence of theoretical atheism, in the world behind the text, is no longer merely the result of historical sense. Moreover, the scholarly rhetoric is more similar to a contemporary post from an internet forum where a theist is debating an atheist by appealing to

authority than to what one would imagine an ancient Israelite would be able to verbalize or consent to if a concise typology of atheism was hypothetically made available for self-identification in relation to each variety of unbelief. Also interesting are the other texts referred to besides Psalms 14:1/53:1 and Job 2:10 already encountered. Here we see Jeremiah 5 as well. Aside from the Psalter, a number of verses from the Prophets and Wisdom Literature will over time come to be increasingly enlisted as instances of this 'practical atheism'. Often the meaning of the latter is subtly changed from 'living as if there is no god' to not acknowledging this particular god (i.e. Yhwh). Though this is partly explained by the fact that monotheism is a contested concept with second-order descriptions of the nature of theism in certain eras and groups in the history of Israelite religion, simply denying that Yhwh (specifically) is involved is technically not practical atheism, unless the latter is further qualified as narrow practical atheism.

The need to dissociate the religious language of the Old Testament texts from theoretical modes of thought (supervening on the binary opposition between Hebraic/biblical and Greek/philosophical thinking) extends also to constructions of the opposite of practical atheism. Thus, according to Fohrer,

> Mosaic Yahwism knew nothing of a theoretical monotheism that denies the existence of other gods. Neither is the term henotheism correct since it refers to a belief in several individual gods who are alternately worshipped as supreme. It would be more correct to speak of monoyahwism or practical monotheism.
>
> (Fohrer 1972, 78)

The exception to the rule at the time is noted elsewhere, inadvertently ascribing a form of theoretical and practical (narrow) atheism to the Yahwism of later redactions of the post-exilic addition and redactions of the scroll of Isaiah:

> Up to this time one can speak solely of a practical monotheism that bound Israel to Yahweh alone, notwithstanding the existence of other gods. Deutero-Isaiah, following upon a few hints in Jeremiah, advocated a theoretical monotheism that expressly denies the existence of other gods.
>
> (Fohrer 1972, 324)

The text quoted as justification of this claim will be elaborated on below. For the present, suffice it to note that here the words 'There is no god' are placed in the speeches of the character of Yhwh, who of course is made to add 'besides me'. The classification of this as denying the existence of other gods has recently been debated, for the religious language in these texts sometimes has Yhwh, not unlike the fool of the Psalms, deny the existence of the gods before ranting against them

in a way that seems to presuppose their existence for the contents of the criticism to be meaningful.

The same trend is evident even among the most influential of the classical theologians of the Old Testament, two of whom again refer to 'atheism' in the world of the text as 'practical atheism' only. For Walther Eichrodt, this was worthy of including in his theology of the Old Testament itself:

> Only the godless and the fool can say 'There is no God'. The Hebrew Yahweh is distinguished from such cases by fervour of feeling and the dynamic of practical proof. What is stressed is not a general existence at all times and places, but existence here and now. (Eichrodt 1961, 190)

For Gerhard von Rad, however, the reference to atheism does not appear in either of his two volumes on the theology of the Old Testament. Instead, it can be found in what was a third volume in all but name, but was chosen to be titled to imply a focus on ancient Israelite wisdom (which is contrasted in the theologies with philosophy in the familiar way – that is, not being systematic or concerned with proof but superior and based on intuition and experience). This link to wisdom was something new in biblical theology, the former at times being considered alien to biblical theism, given the absence of references to 'salvation history' and the link to what has been called examples of 'humanism', 'scepticism', and 'cynicism' in ancient Israel. The actual text is still that of the Psalm typically quoted, but here seen as under 'wisdom influence':

> But this non-recognition of orders and limits which have been once for all set for man was much more than a defect for which the person concerned simply had to pay the price; it was regarded as something positively culpable. Therefore, the fool was adversely affected in his social position; he was denied respect (Prov. 26.1, 8). Where a truth is offered to man, there is no longer any free decision. Whoever refuses to accept it exposes himself to moral judgment. Lastly, this lack of realism also included a misjudging of God himself. The fool 'rages' against God (Prov. 19.3). Later, the same idea was formulated in more basic, theological terms, 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"' (Ps. 14.1). Folly is practical atheism. In this moral, even theological appraisal of unratified knowledge, of rejected perception, there appears in outline one of the most interesting anthropological ideas of the Old Testament. (Rad 1972, 65)

Von Rad's remarks seem to have been influential, with two leading scholars (Brueggemann and Crenshaw, mentioned below) crediting him, perhaps incorrectly, for the decisive view on practical atheism in the Old Testament. Of course, other contemporaries (un)critically followed suit, as in the words of our next sample:

> The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God' (Pss. 14, 1; 53, 1), but this seems to be a kind of practical atheism implying that there are those whose conduct makes no allowance for the fact that they are under God's surveillance, rather than any kind of intellectual rejection of God's existence. (Coggins 1990, 156)

> Even historians of Israelite religion, revived during the 1990s with the seminal publication of Albertz (1994; cf. Zevit 2001), could now appeal to rhetoric like the following on atheism in the world of the text. The same practical/theoretical distinction is still operative almost two centuries later, even where no apologetic motive is obvious behind the particular statement: 'by contrast the resistance groups maintained that the monarchy in fact displaced Yahweh from his position of rule and thus amounted to "practical atheism"'. (Albertz 1994, 123–4).

Following the work of scholars on popular scepticism in the twelve scrolls (minor prophets), other previously seldom mentioned texts are referenced in theologies of the Old Testament that mention 'practical atheism': the words of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem, due for example, to their 'practical "atheism" (Zeph. 1:12)' (Preuss 1995, 91). Of interest is that the critical dating of the text in question relates the oral pre-history to the pre-exilic reign of Josiah (seventh century BC) and thus pre-dating pre-Socratic practical atheism. Moreover, as in the Psalm (14), a post-exilic Judean redaction is identified and it relates this variety of unbelief with immoral behaviour, specifically related to the oppression of the poor whose causes are not immediately taken up by Yhwh (the absence of divine judgement taken as divine absence, indifference, or multivalence).

Towards the end of the millennium, one of the next generation of scholars influenced by von Rad, himself highly influential to this day, is the 'postmodern' US Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. In his monumental 777-page theology of the Old Testament, he too refers to the traditional practical/theoretical atheist distinction under the heading of 'wrong and negative utterances' (about Yhwh). A bit different from his predecessors, Brueggemann discusses the 'usual suspects' of familiar texts related to 'atheism' in a bit more detail, including Psalms 14:1/53:1; Ps 10:4, 11; Isa 47:7, 8, 10; Jeremiah 5:12; and Malachi 2:17. But not much – the entirety of the overview amounts to a few pages. In the footnotes, where earlier related research is mentioned, von Rad is the only name credited when suggesting to the reader that 'On the notion of "practical atheism," see Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon; London: SCM, 1972), 65 and passim' (Brueggemann 1997, 338).

In a subsequent influential and noteworthy publication on monotheism at the beginning of the new millennium, one leading contributor identifies the source for the practical/theoretical distinction (for theism) as that of Schmid:

> One may further differentiate forms of monotheism by using terminological diametrical pairs. Let me name some representative ones, inclusive/exclusive (John Peter Kenney, Klaus Koch, Ernst Axel Knauf, Mark S. Smith et al.); practical/theoretical (Werner H. Schmidt); abstract/concrete (Karl Rahner, Walter Kasper); evolutionary/revolutionary (Jan Assmann); soft/hard (John Dillon); calm/zealous monotheism (Åke V. Ström); particular/universal (Othmar Keel); implicit/explicit (Martin Leuenberger et al.); absolute/ relative (Christoph Auffarth). (Schmid 2003)

What is interesting is that while not with reference to atheism, the practical/theoretical distinction is here supplemented with what hints at an additional nuance. Schmid refers to the need to differentiate the concept of monotheism, which will raise questions of whether the 'softer' forms of monotheism, the practical, particular, or evolutionary, can be classified as monotheisms or should rather be called henotheism or monolatry (cf. Smith 2001).

Perhaps the Old Testament scholar most consistently devoted to more substantial discussions of everything atheistic, pessimistic, sceptical, cynical, and assorted in ancient Israelite in relation to the Near East is James Crenshaw. Having written his dissertation on von Rad, Crenshaw has interestingly devoted most of his career to the traces of doubt in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (especially Ecclesiastes). That being said, however, earlier and later work also intensively engaged the prophetic texts and the Psalms. After a lifetime of working on topics related to 'theodicy', Crenshaw published what can be considered a summary of all related worries implicit in the biblical discourse. In *Defending God, Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil*, the entire first chapter is devoted to, and actually entitled, 'The Atheistic Answer, Abandoning the Quest', and this with reference to the world of the text itself, as he

> examines a little used response in the ancient world with its host of deities. The closest approximation to atheism, which modern interpreters call 'practical atheism,' crops up in a few psalms and is attributed to the fool's unarticulated thoughts. Similar views, proclaimed in a mocking context, have come to rest most unexpectedly in Prov 30, 1–4, but safely placed in the mouth of a foreigner. (Crenshaw 2005, 19)

Again we see the reference to 'practical atheism', implying the traditional distinction between that and theoretical atheism. Once more, even with

Crenshaw, no critical reflection on the distinction itself and experimenting with other typological mapping options is forthcoming. Sometimes the practical/theoretical distinction is used not only to describe what is seen in the world of the text for its own sake, but to use it to take a poke at ideological opponents in the academic world in front of it: 'Experts (EVV wise) can mediate empirical wisdom . . . but they can end up . . . proponents of practical atheism like the people Isaiah attacks' (Goldingay 2010, 710).

> On other occasions, the target is not so much other academics but certain malpractices in Christian churches, which the biblical scholar seeks to criticize by appealing to the authority of Scripture. Usually this is done with some historical sense, but is then applied in a clearly homiletical setting within a piece of academic writing. Thus, with reference to Jeremiah 5:12, where the speaker criticizes the people for having themselves spoken falsely about Yhwh, saying he will do nothing about the situation at hand and that no judgement (evil) will follow, 'Such hubris amounts to a total dismissal of God's person and power. It is a strong declaration of practical atheism and human autonomy. Jeremiah insists that the prophets encourage this insolence when they abdicate their responsibilities' (Stulman 2011, 73). Another instance of implying that more critical peers are the new 'practical atheists' (similar to Goldingay above) is found also in other conservative authors: 'The fruit of historical criticism is systematic, practical atheism' (Waltke 2012, 54). Last but not least, in a recent historical theology of the Hebrew Bible, the same trend with the same texts runs its course to this day: 'the religious sphere in ancient Israel is (most often) marked by sacrifice and temple worship and the possibility that there is no god is viewed as an absurd position only to select fools (Pss 14:1, 53:1)' (Schmid 2019, 26).

Here ends the first part of the present chapter on Israel and the Near East in the history of atheism. The remainder of the discussion will focus on following a more detailed referencing of the biblical texts traditionally and presently considered relevant to how Israel and the Near East in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible relate to the history of atheism.

Atheologies in the Old Testament

First, as regards typology, one would think that by the twenty-first century, discussions of Israel in relation to the Near East as part of the history of atheism would move beyond the practical/theoretical distinction. Implicitly, of course, it has, but one will have a hard time finding any research that locates the associated texts also within the binaries of broad/narrow,

explicit/implicit, positive/negative, hard/soft, strong/weak, and other types. Even the second-order terms within the semantic field of atheism in the world of the text, namely scepticism, pessimism, cynicism, nihilism, and others, often use these terms not in their technical philosophical senses but in their ordinary everyday popular ones (see Priest 1968, 311–26). In this section, the typology will be experimentally broadened before asking whether the practical/theoretical binary does not deconstruct with reference to the texts traditionally associated with atheism in the Old Testament.

Whence the dualism in the philosophical assumptions of the second-order language biblical scholars use when referring to practical as opposed to theoretical atheism of whatever kind in relation to Israel and the Near East? Far back in the philosophical pre-history of the binary we find Aristotle's distinction between *theoria* (thinking), *poiesis* (making), and *praxis* (doing), the latter associated with what is practical (action) and further subdivided into ethics, economics, and politics. Coincidentally or not, it is precisely with reference to the ethical, economical, and political domains that the rhetoric of the texts seek to discredit and defame the characters of those the second-order descriptions associate with 'practical atheism'. Supervening on this perspective is the tendencies of many academic and lay readers to associate the Old Testament (and Hebrew thought) as practically oriented (to what to do instead of what to believe or with philosophical thinking), which probably played a role in allowing for this classification in historical approaches to atheism in Israel and the Near East.

This still leaves the question of how 'practical atheism' as a technical second-order term became popular in biblical (Old Testament) scholarship even if there was a predilection for it. As far as I can determine, a likely gateway was the theological reception of the sermon of John Tillotson (1664), *The Wisdom of Being Religious*. It contains one of the earliest references to practical atheism and coincides with the advent of modern atheism in the west, with Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) one of the pioneers of historical approaches to the world of the text as contemporary, and was highly influential in subsequent theological studies which still did not distinguish biblical from other types of theology. Up-front, the sermon distinguishes two types of unbelievers. The first involves those who are speculative atheists (rather than theoretical, and associated with agnosticism as it 'argues ignorance'). The second type is practical atheism:

> The Practical Atheist, who is wicked and irreligious notwithstanding he does in some sort believe that there is a God, and a future state; he is

> likewise guilty of prodigious Folly. The Principle of the Speculative Atheist argues more Ignorance, but the Practice of the other argues greater Folly. Not to believe a God and another Life, for which there is so much evidence of Reason, is great ignorance and folly; but 'tis the highest madness, when a man does believe these things, to live as if he did not believe them. (Tillotson 1820, 320)

This view is referenced in subsequent biblical scholarship until earlier intra-disciplinary discussions become the citation of choice when discussing practical atheism. Because of the marginality of the topic of atheism in Old Testament studies and due to the selective aversion to philosophical questions, no one seems to question the practical/theoretical distinction with the same merciless scrutiny they do with its counterpart in other contexts (e.g. monotheism, wisdom). The question posed here is not whether there are any elaborate examples of theoretical atheism in Israel and the Near East, but instead – suppose we limit ourselves to accepting the presence of practical atheism – whether the latter does not presuppose implicit theoretical elements. This was already pointed out succinctly in the article on 'atheism' written early in the twentieth century in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. The author of the particular entry begins by making a distinction between two types of 'theoretic' atheism, both of which are also 'moral' and as such not something wholly separated from the realm of the practical. The first is:

> positive moral atheism, in which human actions would neither be right nor wrong, good nor evil, with reference to God, would naturally follow from the profession of positive theoretic atheism; and it is significant of those to whom such a form of theoretic atheism is sometimes attributed, that for the sanctions of moral actions they introduce such abstract ideas as those of duty, the social instinct, or humanity. There seems to be no particular reason why they should have recourse to such sanctions, since the morality of an action can hardly be derived from its performance as a duty, which in turn can be called and known as a 'duty' only because it refers to an action that is morally good. Indeed an analysis of the idea of duty leads to a refutation of the principle in whose support it is invoked, and points to the necessity of a theistic interpretation of nature for its own justification.
>
> (Aveling 1907, n.p.)

The second is described as:

> negative practical or moral atheism may be referred to the second type of theoretic atheism. It is like the first in not relating human actions to an extra-mundane, spiritual, and personal lawgiver; but that, not because such a lawgiver does not exist, but because the human intelligence is incapable

> of so relating them. It must not be forgotten, however, that either negative theoretic atheism or negative practical atheism is, as a system, strictly speaking compatible with belief in a God; and much confusion is often caused by the inaccurate use of the terms, belief, knowledge, opinion, etc.
>
> (Aveling 1907, n.p.)

The author of the entry then lists a third type, which is generally, though perhaps wrongly, included in moral atheism: 'Practical atheism is not a kind of thought or opinion, but a mode of life.' This is more correctly called, as it is described, godlessness in conduct, quite irrespective of any theory of philosophy, or morals, or of religious faith. Perhaps the dominance of Old Testament theology and histories of Israelite religion by Protestant scholars as well as the lack of interest in the topic were part of the reason why sensible considerations like these were overlooked. In other words, while practice can do without theory (e.g. people have used language long before they discussed grammar), it does not follow that theory is absent from practice (e.g. one can discern elements of grammar in language whether those who use it are aware of this or not). Interestingly, and relevant to this point, a recent posthumous publication of Derrida seminars (1976–77) contains a helpful if obtuse discussion of the deconstruction of the theory/practice binary in the history of western philosophy (Derrida 2019).

On the analogy above, it is not difficult to imagine that there were some people in Israel and the Near East (and even in the world of the Old Testament text) whose 'practical atheism' made sense to them precisely because of certain assumptions about the existence of the divine, and not simply about divine action. After all, most readers, academic or lay, already agree by implication that narrow atheism is present in the world of the text. There is consensus that the Old Testament contains texts that do appear to deny the existence of other gods for specific reasons, rather than just believing in those gods but living as though they do not exist (i.e. narrow practical atheism). Of course, narrow practical atheism there may be, but though perhaps not very elaborate (for this is not the purpose of the biblical texts), the Old Testament does contain many samples of the rejections of the reality of other gods in such a way that said rejection is supplemented by at least one reason (rather than argument, though the latter is implicit and can be inferred from what is unformulated).

Let us consider some examples, first of atheology from the evaluative point of view of the writerly ideologies, then seeing if we can discern these as present in the construction of the perspectives of the opposing sides. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the only terminology etymologically related to atheism in

the classic Greek sense comes from an anomalous rendering in the Symmachus version of the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament). As noted by Thayer (1901), we find this in the translation of the Hebrew of Hosea 4:15 as indicated in the beginning of the second line of the entry on atheism:

> ἄθεος ἄθεος, (Θεός) [from Pindar down], without God, knowing and worshipping no God, in which sense Aelian v. h. 2, 31 declares ὅτι μηδείς τῶν βαρβάρων ἄθεος; in classic authors generally slighting the gods, impious, repudiating the gods recognized by the state, in which sense certain Greek philosophers, the Jews (Josephus, contra Apion 2, 14, 4), and subsequently Christians were called ἄθεοι by the heathen (Justin, Apology 1, 13, etc.). Pott. ἀθεους Θεόν ἠγνοήκλασι, Philo, leg. ad Gai. § 25 αἰγυπτιακὴ ἀθεότης, Hosea 4:15 Symm. οἶκος ἀθεΐας, a house in which idols are worshipped. (Thayer, 1901)

The first admittedly controversial sample of 'atheological rhetoric' to be noted is the one some interpreters find hidden in the opposing voice represented towards the end of the Book of Proverbs:

> The words of Agur son of Jakeh. An oracle.
>
> Thus says the man: I am weary, O God,
> I am weary, O God. How can I prevail?
> 2 Surely I am too stupid to be human;
> I do not have human understanding.
> 3 I have not learned wisdom,
> nor have I knowledge of the holy ones.
> 4 Who has ascended to heaven and come down?
> Who has gathered the wind in the hollow of the hand?
> Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?
> Who has established all the ends of the earth?
> What is the person's name?
> And what is the name of the person's child?
> Surely you know! (Prov. 30:1–4)

Some translations, however, do not render the second part of verse 1 as above. Instead, they involve reading the Hebrew of the words rendered here as 'I am weary' (×2) as an Aramaic name 'Ithi-el', meaning 'There is no god' and 'How can I prevail?' accordingly as 'I have prevailed'. This gives us the image of a haughty atheist as proverbial 'fool', even if a foreigner as well. However, because such a reading is not generally followed, it will not be discussed in more detail here, except to note the self-debasing and cynical questions that follow can be understood either as a quasi-philosophical

rhetoric expressing doubts about the knowability, identity, or existence of the particular conception of the divine. It is hard to say, but of interest is that Yhwh himself is thus represented in many poetical texts in the Psalms, Prophets, and Wisdom books.

One (by implication) reasoned rejection of non-existing gods is found in certain (sometimes misplaced) critiques of the use of images in cultic settings, considered non-existent for being a product and figment of human imagination (and not caring for sophisticated theological distinctions between deities and statues):

> Can man make for himself gods? Such are no gods! (Jer 16:20 NRSV)

Other texts seem to presuppose something very much like a more reasoned atheology concerned with 'proofs' and demanding 'evidence', the failure to produce which is considered sufficient reason to not believe in the gods in view.

> Set forth your case, says the Lord;
> bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.
> Let them bring them, and tell us
> what is to happen.
> Tell us the former things, what they are,
> so that we may consider them,
> and that we may know their outcome;
> or declare to us the things to come.
> Tell us what is to come hereafter,
> that we may know that you are gods;
> do good, or do harm,
> that we may be afraid and terrified.
> You, indeed, are nothing
> and your work is nothing at all;
> whoever chooses you is an abomination.
>
> (Isa 41:21–4 NRSV)

In this sense, we encounter a ridicule of gods as figments of human imagination, as useless when called upon in times of trouble, as outdated because of new religious-historical belief revision, and as implicitly rejected within the existence and identity criteria for divinity in a different theology. Given this, why is it so hard to imagine some people assumed the same with reference to Yhwh? Other texts even contain early examples of offensive, blaspheming, insulting, and crude language with reference to gods, not unlike those associated with 'militant atheists':

> Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field,
> and they cannot speak;
> they have to be carried,
> for they cannot walk.
> Be not afraid of them,
> for they cannot do evil,
> neither is it in them to do good.
> They are both stupid and foolish;
> the instruction of idols is but wood! (Jer 10:3–5 NRSV)

There are also texts that critique not merely anthropomorphism but lifelessness (i.e. dead gods):

> Their idols are silver and gold,
> the work of men's hands.
> They have mouths, but do not speak;
> eyes, but do not see.
> They have ears, but do not hear;
> noses, but do not smell.
> They have hands, but do not feel;
> feet, but do not walk;
> and they do not make a sound in their throat.
> (Psalm 115:4–7 NRSV)

Many texts like these, mostly less elaborate, are found elsewhere in the Old Testament. A condition of their possibility is having some sufficient reasons (even if not formulated, by analogy to many contemporary atheists) for statements like these to be thought meaningful in the first place. In other words, to be able to conceive of other gods in these ways and in these terms on these conditions requires there to be reasons, speculations, and arguments that lie behind the bits and pieces that made their way into the text. There is no other way to explain why atheological religious language that does seem to deny the existence of other gods is the way it is, or why it is there at all.

As noted above, it is not difficult or invalid inference to imagine some people not only thinking the same thoughts about some version of Yhwh, about Yhwh, or about all gods. If so, and given the fact that the following are caricatures from theistic perspectives, the presence of 'theoretical' or even 'broad' atheism cannot be ruled out with certainty.

Psalm 14 (NRSV)
Denunciation of Godlessness. To the leader. Of David. 1 Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there

is no one who does good. 2 The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind, to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. 3 They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one. 4 Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the Lord? 5 There they shall be in great terror, for God is with the company of the righteous. 6 You would confound the plans of the poor, but the Lord is their refuge. 7 O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

Psalm 53 (NRSV)
Denunciation of Godlessness. To the leader, according to Mahalath. A Maskil of David. 1 Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good. 2 God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. 3 They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one. 4 Have they no knowledge, those evildoers, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God? 5 There they shall be in great terror, in terror such as has not been. For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly; [a] they will be put to shame, [b] for God has rejected them. 6 O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When God restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

In verse 1 we see the claim 'There is no god'. One could say this is merely practical atheism in light of the problem of looking for modern or early philosophical atheism in these texts. Or one could consider that as it stands, the proposition that there is no god means that the property of being a god is not instantiated anywhere in the world. Moreover, the reference to 'God' here is misleading in the English; being capitalized, it makes no sense since it is not a personal name ('God') which is negated. Here, 'elohim' (Hebrew) is generic, a common noun, which in turn even allows it to be read in the plural ('no gods'). This is turn implies broad atheism.

Of course, the view of 'the fool' is said to be what is being thought (saying in the heart), which, being impossible to know, can be considered a caricature. This, then, could go either way: either the speaker in constructing the fool by generalizing about what is not believed, thereby ascribing broad atheism even if this is hyperbolic; or it is an oversimplification of broad atheism which, when tied to immorality later does not do justice to the substance or content of the broad atheism involved. It seems impossible to say with certainty. Further complicating the matter is the composition and redaction history of the particular Psalm(s). The latter process is evident, at the very least, even when merely comparing the wording of every subsection in Psalms 14 and 53.

Psalm 10 (NRSV, relevant selected verses only)

3 For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart,
those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord.
4 In the pride of their countenance the wicked say,
'God will not seek it out';
all their thoughts are, 'There is no God.'
5 Their ways prosper at all times;
your judgments are on high, out of their sight;
as for their foes, they scoff at them.
6 They think in their heart, 'We shall not be moved;
throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity.'
11 They think in their heart, 'God has forgotten,
he has hidden his face, he will never see it.'
13 Why do the wicked renounce God,
and say in their hearts, 'You will not call us to account'?

The translation of broken Hebrew in verse 4 is contentious, yet many opt for it. Here we find the words 'there is no god', again read into the thoughts of others. As with Psalm 14, the claim there is no God can be taken as referring to deities in general, in the plural, and as an absolute denial for the same reasons suggested to apply to that Psalm. If the text is monotheistic, the same situation is implied, since denying 'God' would be tantamount to denying divine reality as such (although again the negative particle beforehand suggests that 'God' here is a genus, not a personal name, which is a philosophical-theological anachronism). In this Psalm, it would seem that one of the reasons inferred from the 'practical atheists' for thinking there is no god is lack of any evidence of divine intervention of the type of deity that would have caused them to fail rather than prosper due to their impiety (verse 5, the judgements said to be out of their sight, which is a loaded way of what basically says the same thing, or could be interpreted as doing so). Another reason is implicit in the next verse, which is historical even if cast in the future tense: they seem to have become conscious that the lack of divine retribution in the world was already observed by other generations, the experience of which they extrapolate from and project onto their collective future (their words again being rephrased by their opponents to sound obnoxious).

Verse 11 has the kind of language that makes the classification of practical atheism seem apt, though again it has to be remembered that it hardly makes sense that those who think there are no gods will also think that a specific god (Yhwh) has forgotten and has hidden his face and will never see their admittedly evil works (this is clearly language of a theist and the evaluative point of view of the narrator who thus succeeds in presenting these people as rebellious rather than reasonably cynical). The same is clearly evident in verse 13, where

those who are constructed as not thinking there to be any god are said to address the specific god (Yhwh), in prayer, telling him he will not call them to account (which would be funny if it was not so incoherent a caricature).

All said and done, these latter misrepresentations clearly presuppose that another reason implied to be sufficient for those who say there is no god is the same problems with divine justice that would make later theologians construct theodicies and philosophers of religion try to solve the problem of evil as itself an argument for atheism (practical or otherwise, and logical, natural, moral, and other varieties of evil). The religious language is hardly philosophical, but the conditions of possibility for thinking there is no god and for the reasons inferred here are sufficiently second-order to count as implicit theoretical atheism folk-philosophy or atheology implicit in the world of the text. This is also the case with those rhetorical questions behind which a wealth of atheological reasoning (valid or not) in both Israel and the Near East lie buried. These include, among others:

> My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually, 'Where is your God?' (Ps 42:3 NRSV)

> Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?' (Ps 79:10 NRSV)

> Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?' (Ps 115:2 NRSV)

> Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?' (Joel 2:17 NRSV)

These texts might presuppose narrow theoretical implicit atheists (with reference to other gods) unable to get as good as they give. Or was the situation perhaps a little more complicated? For consider what happens when some of the popular residual dogmatic-theological assumptions supervening on the binary opposition between biblical and philosophical thinking and almost indelible even in liberal or critical scholarship are dropped, even if only experimentally and for the sake of the argument. For the longest time it was, for understandable reasons, assumed that the writers of the world behind the texts believed that the character of Yhwh (and similar) that they constructed in the worlds of the text they (co-) created existed in the world behind the text. Though it would not have made sense in the pre-critical era, the research on the nature of scribal culture in the ancient world has made the following statement by Nietzsche regarding the classical authors suddenly seem less foreign:

> Irreligiosity of artists – Homer is so much at home among his gods, and as a poet takes such pleasure in them, that he at any rate must have been profoundly unreligious; with that with which popular belief presented him –

> a paltry, crude, in part horrible superstition – he trafficked as freely as a sculptor with his clay, that is to say with the same ease and impartiality as that possessed by Aeschylus and Aristophanes and which in more recent times distinguishes the great artists of the Renaissance, as it does Shakespeare and Goethe.
>
> (Nietzsche 1984 [1878]; aphorism, 125)

It seems almost odd to imagine that the author of Genesis 2 or Exodus 20 or Job were not aware of creating the god as a character in a narrative. Consider the words of Thomas Thompson, whose view is, admittedly, usually not even considered by secular biblical scholars: 'don't think for a moment that the narrator of Genesis or his audience ever believed in or prayed to that kind of god' (Thompson 1999, 303).

In both cases, Homer and the Bible, though the writings were later considered sacred by those in the world in front of the text and its ontology viewed with a naive realism, it is easy to imagine that those who created the stories could not take it that seriously in their own capacity. The older views of revelation and inspiration are no longer tenable for various reasons, but the implication of this is that the writers of the biblical texts were themselves atheists of sorts, at least with reference to the ontological status of their own literature constructs. That would make the divine speaker in the text a product of the human imagination, perhaps not made from wood or stone, gold or silver, but still human, with ink on parchment. Moreover, it would also make the god-character who himself did not believe in any greater god above himself, rejecting of all others perhaps a mythological representation of certain varieties of human theoretical atheism projected onto the divine mind.

Seen in this way, it could be argued that the crude style of atheological rhetoric of the Old Testament provided a precedent and frame of reference for many western atheists when criticizing theism. To the extent that the character of Yhwh is constructed as greater than the gods who themselves are not really gods, it seems helpful to many to, wittingly or not, take on the persona of those versions of Yhwh in the text that rant and rave against worthless idols (of the mind), mocking all gods as no gods made by humans out of ignorance, and leading them to act immorally and depend on worthless nothings who can neither save nor doom.

Conclusion

So much more could be said. And indeed, what has been said as always requires a lot of additional considerations, qualifications, disclaimers, and so

on. As an introductory overview of what is available on Israel and the Near East in relation to the history of atheism within the confines of a single chapter, it should suffice. At the very least, both the discussion of the history of the concept of atheism within the second-order discourse of biblical scholars concerned with clarifying the nature of atheism in the Old Testament and the subsequent expansion and enrichment of the discussion via typology, deconstruction, and atheology offer a novel condensed data set not available elsewhere.

To sum up what has been ascertained, from the overview provided we can conclude that Old Testament scholars rarely and briefly remark on how Israel in relation to the Near East fits into the history of atheism. When they do, even from the nineteenth century onwards (despite the pre-critical pre-history), 'atheism' is nevertheless a second-order concept still said to be descriptively apt for associated phenomena identified in the worlds behind and of the biblical texts.

The related research clearly conflates the modern (atheism as a belief state) and ancient (atheism as impiety) senses of the term, which is concurrently confusedly mitigated by the distinction of choice, namely between practical and theoretical atheism, the former indicated as the nature of unbelief despite propositional content *prima facie* suggesting the existence of broad and (unarticulated) implicit theoretical atheism. Though the scholarly discussion and distinctions are undoubtedly modern, the reduction to practical atheism reverts everything back to what could have remained located within the original sense of atheism as impiety, immorality, and localized heresy.

Theoretical broad atheism is seen to be present primarily within the writings of more fundamentalist scholars, who tend to continue the pre-critical tradition of interpreting atheological language in the text as indicative of broad, hard, and positive atheism (even on the assumption that the texts are monotheistic), thus reinforcing the idea that rethinking whether atheism of a variety other than practical may be present is likely itself an unhistorical if not apologetically motivated reading. But this is not so, and even liberal, post-liberal, secular, and other perspectives, though historically conscious and culturally sensitive, are supervened on by residual anachronistic binary oppositions between faith and reason, Hebrew and Greek thought, Bible and philosophy.

To this day, the Old Testament texts most frequently appearing in the scholarly discussion of atheism in Israel and the Near East are Psalms 10:4; 14:1/53:1; Job 2:10; Prov. 30:1–4; Isa 47:7, 8, 10; Jeremiah 5:12; Zephaniah 1, 12; and Malachi 2:17. These texts are dated for the most part to the post-exilic period

(Persian or Hellenistic) of the fifth to second centuries BC. A variety of rhetorical contexts and literary genres are included, such as prose and poetry, prayer and proclamation, proverbs and song, prophecy and polemics. The actual religious language expressing unbelief includes the thought that there is no god, the denial of divine justice, a rejection of the idea of divine intervention, irreverence towards Yhwh, oppression of others with no consideration of the divine commands, the rejection of other gods, and so on.

The atheistic subject in the world of the text is variably identified and is extended to include so-called fools, the wicked, the godless, Yhwh himself, the general population, rulers, and others. The atheological perspective thus reconstructed is supervened on by both anachronistic second-order scholarly discourse and the evaluative point of view of the pro-Yahwistic speaker, spokesperson, and mind-reader in the world of the text (not to mention readerly ideologies) (i.e. it is never really a depiction of a first-person account). The religious object is also variable, with the type of theism relative to which the atheism is expressed not to be confused with the monotheism and associated concepts of God in classical theism and perfect-being theology.

Implicit in the atheologies of the Old Testament, atheism in the world of the text (distinguished from atheism in ancient Israel) is constructed as the result of what can functionally be related to four philosophical categories (here senses). These are ignorance (epistemological sense), associated with immorality (ethical sense), implied to be theoretically grounded in a rejection of certain causal relations between the divine and the world (metaphysical sense), and following a trail of post-hoc fallacies of reasoning from what happens in the world to the divine (logical sense). This is the case both with Yahwistic and anti-Yahwistic atheologies. As for atheological arguments, one can infer that these included the apparent quantitative and/or qualitative non-instantiation of certain alleged divine properties in the world (knowledge, power, presence, goodness, etc.), the hiddenness of the divine as conceived in the world of ordinary everyday experience, the suffering in the world, and/or the absence of retribution, and so on.

Ultimately, an atheology of the Old Testament exclusively focused on reconstructing the varieties of unbelief in Israel and the Near East as constructed in the Old Testament is yet to be written. The conversation can be much more elaborate and in-depth and does not have to limit itself to scepticism, pessimism, humanism, and so on. An atheology of the Old Testament in its historical and descriptive tasks has to go beyond available references to 'practical atheism' so that the focus is shifted from theological pluralism and religious diversity to atheological pluralism and irreligious

diversity. There are sufficient quantities of data implicit in the first-order religious language about why Yhwh (or certain versions of Yhwh), or other gods, were assumed not to exist (in the world of the text). These require clarification with the aid of a richer typology of atheism than what is currently utilized in biblical scholarship. Doing so cannot but enrich not only our understanding of the Old Testament and biblical scholarly constructions of atheism in Israel and the Near East, but therewith, of the conceptual history of atheism itself.

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PART II

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ATHEISMS IN HISTORY

4

Pre-modern Japan

SARAH WHYLLY

Writing on the subject of atheism in Japan before the modern period means discussing a concept for which the Japanese have multiple words, and yet none at all. Studying terms for their equivalence in other languages means we are always locating our own concepts in the discourse we are reading. When examining the evidence that indicates the presence of such a term in discourse, the project takes on the character of careful reading of texts and an examination of their context, if possible, in order to best understand how the term relates to other ideas and then an investigation of how this compares with the concept under consideration. Careful historical work demands that a scholar look not only to how one individual might have used a term or how a term or phrase might have meaning that relates to the concept under consideration, but also at who that individual may have been corresponding with or writing for, what their response might have been, or how others in that same time period might have used that term or phrase. In addition, studying how people lived out their beliefs and how they practiced in relation to these concepts involves anthropological and archaeological forensic work and carefully parsing of historical records.

The meanings of words and phrases shift and change, as do the ideas they are associated with. This is a generic truth hardly worth mentioning, but for the fact that it is so easy to forget when we are speaking or writing on such. One of the routes easiest to navigate with such work is available when a term begins to appear in a language due to its contact with another culture's language. When this happens, the connections to the cultural web of beliefs and practices in which the term is embedded come with it. How all of this is understood, absorbed, reformulated, or rejected, in some cases, depends upon aspects of the sociocultural context into which it comes. How we as scholars reflect on that phenomenon tells us some interesting things, not only

about how such things occur but also about how our own context affects how we understand the history we are seeking to understand.

In this chapter I endeavor to discuss an early history of atheism in Japan, its connections to China and its language, and to offer what I believe is a historical timeline for understanding atheism in context. The hope I have for this chapter is that it will open up more space for discourse related to the idea of atheism in Japan. Specifically, I intend to propose a perhaps controversial, but I hope very different, paradigm for atheism than what we have seen as predominant culturally. The supposition that atheism is always defined by its relationship to theism implies a dichotomous ontological framework that I take to be unnecessary in relation to some sociohistorical contexts in which theism has, or had, no place. In this chapter I attempt to demonstrate why a supposition of theism in relation to ancient Japanese culture is incorrect and why atheism is an appropriate descriptor for the kinds of cultural activity observed in early Japan often referred to as "religion." Toward this end, I will hold off on providing what I understand to be a definition for atheism in ancient Japan until the end of this exploration, rather than presenting it as a paradigm that guides the work from the beginning.

Much of what could be said about atheism in Japan in the contemporary study of religion is shaped by lively and ongoing conversations in the area of theory and method that ask questions about the imposition of terminology and conceptual understanding drawn from one culture and imposed onto another that may not have language and concepts that align. The question of the usefulness of the concept of "religion" for understanding kami worship, Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism is a live and persistent one. Part of what I hope to establish in this chapter is the investigative usefulness of deconstructive approaches to the study of religion for giving us new starting points of study. Additionally, I take a combinative approach to method in this chapter, following the historical usages of conceptual language combined with examinations of relevant physical evidence to uncover new possible explanations for long-studied phenomena.

There has been a great deal said about the construction of religion, by scholars, within cultural contexts that lie outside the history of those cultures dominated by Christian influence over the course of the last 2000 years. The critiques of such construction in relation to the identification of religion in Japan, by authors like Masuzawa Tomoko and Jason Ānanda Josephson, discuss the effects of conceptual imposition in the context of cultures incorporating traditions like Buddhism and Islam. Masuzawa points out, in

discussing the roots of the pluralistic framework of world religions so familiar to many of us in the study of religion today, that historical circumstances themselves produce the kinds of questions and answers taken to be most indicative of the time period in which they appear (Masuzawa 2012). Those scholars who introduced concepts such as "world religions" did so as a result of the circumstances of their time, as a product of the history they were living. Masuzawa wants us to remember that the concepts we take as foundational parts of the subject we study come into being as a part of particular historical circumstances and this history is an important part of the definition we come to be familiar with, even as such concepts are treated as abstract taxonomic descriptors integral to understanding what religion is. The very existence of such concepts is rooted in historical circumstances that have profound effects on the performance of religion in lived experiences. The study of religion and the creation of concepts to aid in this study have had undeniable effects on how those religions exist in the world, as well as how those in the world understand these religions.

Josephson, in *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, is also interested in the historical circumstances of the creation of concepts. In particular, he focuses on the concepts of "religion," "heresy," and, later, "superstition" to demonstrate the ways in which external pressure from the Christian world would shape the boundaries of what fit into those conceptual categories and thus what was acceptable in terms of cultural practices and beliefs and what was not (Josephson 2012).

Why are the views of these scholars of religion important to an examination of atheism in the Japanese context? The views of these scholars represent significant pathways for the way religion is studied and how the history of the study of religion is understood. More importantly, their work is representative of critiques that are mainstream in our discipline now. However, such legitimate critiques of our discipline leave us with a conundrum. How can we study a concept like atheism without that study falling victim to these criticisms of the history of our discipline? Masuzawa admits to offering no help in the form of an answer to this question. Rather, she states that her purpose is to give scholars pause in the work of the comparative studies of religion: "A brief pause may allow us to think refreshed, and perhaps even to imagine differently" (Masuzawa 2012).

Josephson offers similar thoughts as he notes that history unfolding is a process of becoming for what we refer to as religions, meaning that individual representative traditions are always in the process of becoming: "Even in modernity, religion cannot be taken as a self-evident category.

Religious studies must therefore be the discipline that suspends its primary object of inquiry, never taking for granted religion's meaning" (Josephson 2012). Self-reflection, openness to honest critique, and constant attention to the historical roots of our investigations are the current prescriptions for scrupulous and ethical study in the discipline of religion.

Rather than abandoning conceptual understanding altogether, what would seem an impossible task for creatures like ourselves who rely on the sharing of concepts as a means of conveying meaning, we are warned to always be aware of the roots of our concepts and be prepared to broaden our understanding and definitions for them.

In attempting this inquiry into the concept of atheism in the early Japanese context, I believe that having a broadened understanding of this concept is required and that this can be accomplished by better understanding an instantiation of it in which the parameters of such are expanded. In doing so, I hope to suggest alternatives to the starting assumptions and original paradigms which cast a very long shadow over the history of the study of these parts of Japanese culture. Japanese history presents an opportunity to see the ways in which a concept like atheism might be best understood as a dynamic concept, with beliefs and practices at different points in history fitting differing definitions for this concept. As scholars, we should be looking for places where our concepts begin to fail us; making changes to our understanding of them would be beneficial to providing means of understanding what we are encountering. These changes to our understanding of a concept then lead us to see the changes this makes in the overall conceptual framework we have for a thing under study.

To begin, I will lay out what I believe to be divisions in the periods of time most important for thinking about Japanese practices, concepts, and ideas related to atheism. These periods of time and the shifts to different meanings coincide with historical events that facilitate such changes. The definition provided previously then becomes a linguistic starting point for thinking about all the different ways one might understand or relate to that definition, rather than an end point of discussion that we seek an exact match for in another sociohistorical context. The following divisions in Japanese history are the places scholars can begin looking, and we should be prepared to find competing uses or understandings of the related terms we find that we can translate as atheism. In laying out such divisions in time and offering up a timeline, I fully expect that others will see and understand it differently and perhaps further advance our perception of how we can understand atheism in the context of Japanese history and culture.

The focus of this chapter and the first of the discernible historical shifts related to atheism occurs from the Jōmon period, 縄文時代, or *Jōmon jidai* through the Yayoi periods, 弥生時代, or *Yayoi Jidai* in Japan, given the availability of material evidence and the introduction of the Chinese ontological schema during this time. Such a shift occurs again when the Japanese begin undertaking the writing of their own mythologies and producing textual material forming the basis for establishing a cultural identity that they establish as distinct from those who visited them prior. The movement and changes of Buddhism in Japan is likely another. It would likely be useful to spend time examining variations of the understanding of atheism in relation to the development of individual Buddhist groups in Japanese history. Another such period of change occurs with the Japanese initial encounters with Christianity. Atheism, with a different kind of meaning, appears with the forced interaction of Japanese culture with European culture when the values of a changed western world are introduced into Japan after the events of 1853. Finally, changes that occurred after World War II – the increased appearance of what are referred to as Japanese New Religions, as well as the development of new sociopolitical and scientific viewpoints within Japan – offer opportunities to gauge and reflect on the potential effects that such religions and globalization have had on the religious self-identification of Japanese people, particularly with regard to a kind of atheism that is an imported concept.

During each of these periods, new debates over ideas become a part of Japanese discourse and the opportunity for reflections upon the beliefs of the Japanese people related to their gods, the nature of the world, their ancestors, and the role of reason became possible. Within each of these divisions there are many subdivisions relating to historical events and the changing conditions of the lives of Japanese people. One of the limitations of the timeline framework I have proposed is that many of the divisions I suggest relate to the interactions that the Japanese had with cultures outside their own. We should be mindful of this and look for other places in Japanese history where there may have been internally generated changes to ideas that relate to the concept of atheism. However, historical investigation needs a place to begin and I am focused in this chapter on linguistic concepts and the cultural circumstances that informed them, noting that the assumptions of those engaged in, and who have had their education affected by, the project of studying Japanese religion in the world religions paradigm have produced a disjunct in how we understand historical phenomena in the Japanese context and how we communicate that in an educational setting and to the

world at large. The historical events I have proposed above as divisions provide us with a starting framework that helps us, so long as we don't become so attached to them that we insist on their persistence in the face of evidence that suggests revision is necessary. Our guiding principle should be the assumption that taxonomic divisions of history are reflective of power structures directly related to the internal composition of those creating the divisions.

This chapter focuses for its primary examination on the Yayoi period, before the appearance of written history during the Asuka period, 飛鳥時代, or *Asuka Jidai*. While the Yayoi period does not offer its own written records upon which to reflect, artifacts from this time may offer a contrast to the way later written language may have shaped how people thought about kami and human likenesses to them. Prior written records do exist, however, from Chinese contact with the Yayoi Japanese; thus, these earlier periods represent a time when Japanese traditions were orally transmitted to Chinese observers and writers rather than via a written record produced by the Japanese themselves. Chinese history, parallel to the Yayoi period, encompasses the Warring States period, 戰國時代, or *Zhànguó Shídài*, from 475 BC to 221 BC, through the middle of the Jin Dynasty, 晉朝, or *Jìn Cháo*, from AD 266 to AD 420. The Asuka period is paralleled by the Tang Dynasty, 唐朝, or *Táng cháo* in China. This is a period that offers scholars a window into how the influence of Chinese culture and traditions may have affected thinking on the distinction between a material world and a spiritual one within ancient Japanese culture. It also allows us to question the historical assumptions about points of similarity between cultural traditions, which has long undergirded the study of religion. Specifically, we can target the common, derogatory, and rather ethnocentric assumption that Japanese culture, for most of its history, recapitulated the cultures of others and that there is little that is unique about it.

With regard to the period of oral culture and tradition prior to the introduction of writing, we must look to the aspects of ritual and the beliefs that accompanied them to help us relate to an atheism that moves beyond a definition of a lack of belief in God or gods and toward a definition of a view of the world that relies solely upon materialist explanations. This is a worldview that takes atheism to be a truth produced by materialism. This might also mean that there are words more specific than "atheism" to use since the word itself and its historical origins are rooted in the idea of theism and the influence it has had on western thought deriving from Zoroastrianism, Egyptian, Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Christian European traditions. Or, we can treat the openness and fungibility of language as

pragmatically valuable and move forward willing to expand the definition of "atheism" so long as careful work is done to show how the term is still applicable and still offers value as a meaningful descriptor.

Ever an advocate of pragmatic value, I believe that I can offer food for thought on the potential for the term "atheism" to be applicable to early Japanese conceptual frameworks of the universe with a focus on the period just before and during first contact with explorers from China. In my view, if we are interested in atheism in Japan during this much earlier period, then we must be willing to begin and focus our investigation on the traditions of Japan prior to written language and then try to understand the ways in which Chinese thought may have had an effect on these traditions.

In reference to the Jōmon and Yayoi periods, as there are no written records from this time by Japanese authors, we are left with the accounts written by Chinese visitors to Japan during this early period. Their observations do not reflect on the belief systems of the Japanese themselves, but are heavily descriptive of the rituals, the land, and their social structures. It is not until the arrival of the first written languages of Japan and the completion of the *Kojiki*, 古事記, *Records of Ancient Matters*, in AD 712, and the *Nihon Shoki*, 日本書紀,*The Chronicles of Japan*, in AD 720, that a written history of Japan from the beginning is provided from the perspective of the Japanese. Of interest to us in our exploration of the presence of atheism within the culture of Japan during this time is the concept of *kami,* 神, and we can use this as a conceptual anchor for our investigations.

So much has been written about the early tradition of "kami worship," as it has been called, and much of it has been shaped through the lens of Judeo-Christian thinking, the ontological framework of which insists that spirit is a thing separable from matter. Taking this kind of thinking apart have been projects of those like Josephson and Masuzawa, works that are classified as deconstructionist and anti-colonialist within the contemporary study of religion in the sub-field of Japanese studies. An accurate understanding of what kami are and how they interact with the world produces the very possible conclusion that the Japanese early traditions that are later connected to the development of other traditions such as Shinto may possess beginnings that are more rightly understood as atheistic. It may only be the framework of dualistic, non-materialist theism that is responsible for historical assumptions about aspects of theism within Japanese culture.

It is important to understand that there are no claims in early literature that the kami are a force external to the material world. In fact, descriptions are limited and mainly point to their existence within the material world. As

other scholars have noted, kami refers to the energy that is present in many things: inanimate objects, animals, celestial events and objects such as the Sun, Moon, or wind, human beings, and artifacts with special purposes, such as a sword or a jar. This energy is described in various ways for digestion by English-speaking audiences. Thomas Kasulis describes it as "awe-inspiring" (Kasulis 2018, 52). To be charitable to Kasulis, he is certainly not alone in the use of this term to describe kami, and this description offers a solemnity to the kami that suggests that one should view them as being equally worthy of the seriousness afforded the Christian God. However, we should be aware that this is because this language is sociohistorically loaded. The use of "awe" as a descriptor for the experience of the divine, the numinous, or *mysterium tremendum*, as it has also been known, among early scholars of religion in Europe and the United States has been the subject of much study coming directly from what is taken to be canonical in that study, beginning with authors like Rudolf Otto and extending through the work of venerated thinkers like Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade. It is suggested that it is the perception of the energy of the kami sharing space with objects, places, beings – humans, both living and dead, animals, or phenomena that inspire awe. However, using the language of "awe," given this history, invokes images of kami as divine in nature or as deities, and this is a direct imposition of one cultural view over another. This is highly problematic in terms of the paradigms imposed, and it obscures the possible meanings present within the Japanese cultural context. This is true even in the cases of those referred to as celestial kami from whom other aspects of the world were born. The understanding that figures such as Amaterasu, 天照, and Susanō-no-mikoto, 須佐之男命, are deities occurs after cultural contact that introduces into the Japanese language a Christian concept of gods with a very different meaning from much older concepts of kami. It might be more useful to describe the sense of mystery or uniqueness of nature; a hidden being that can sometimes be perceived. Kasulis clarifies later in his further explication on the subject of kami that the entire world is an energy-filled and animated place where spiritual forces impose order to the benefit of humans. At the same time he notes that humans must live with the reality that kami can be both helpful and destructive in terms of their interactions with humans (Kasulis 2018, 52). Kasulis' use of clarifying detail contrasted with use of the language of awe notably appears in a text likely to appear on a reading list for a college course in Japanese philosophy or religion, so it serves as a reminder to us that our choice of language directly impacts how generations of learners will understand and relate to newly introduced concepts.

Descriptions of kami are quite different from the descriptions of deities present in other mythologies, such as the ones that informed the sociocultural development of Europe. The sociocultural underpinnings of the concepts of kami and god are quite different and the use of the terms "gods" or "deities" as translations for kami in the English language produces conceptual associations of a very different sort of being from the qualities the kami were believed to possess. In the view of this writer, the use of "gods" or "deities" is limiting in terms of the descriptive work needed to communicate a particular sociohistorical instantiation of the concept of kami. The persistent use of this as a translation contributes to a multitude of difficulties in fostering understanding about what sort of beings kami are. This difficulty is passed on from scholars writing and teaching in English to those who learn about Japanese cultural traditions from them.

As someone who teaches undergraduate students in Japanese cultural traditions, I recognize the profound difficulty of avoiding using terms like gods, goddesses, and deities with my students, who often enter my classes knowing little about such traditions except that they have often read about the "gods and goddesses" of Japan. Even one lecture in which this parallel is introduced as a possible understanding for kami can become the defining feature of what many of those students carry forward as their definitive understanding of what kami are. For some students, given their cultural background, it may conflict with the paradigm they have for understanding a concept they have grown up with, which may introduce a profound discomfort given the instructor's perceived authority. Their acceptance of this may have more to do with a desire to maintain their grades and/or a sense that their own understanding is wrong somehow in the face of scholarly hegemony. Neither of these is a desirable outcome for most instructors.

The acceptance of the parallel among students who have grown up within a Christian-dominated religious framework and/or within a culture heavily influenced by Christian thinking that includes particular concepts of gods/goddesses is understandable, as it is often easy to grasp for many students and allows them to fill in other gaps in understanding and quickly answer questions related to the concept of kami, such as where they live and what powers they might have. Unfortunately, it may be completely wrong and so, as difficult as it may be, doing the pedagogically responsible work of preparing students for conceptual understandings that do not rely upon such comparisons is necessary.

Among scholars in Japanese studies, this term might not cause the same incorrect assumptions, as many have been inured by graduate education

relying or focusing heavily on deconstruction of and flexible meanings for such terms. However, in attempting to communicate the concept of kami to new scholars in the field, the use of these terms can have a greater potential for misunderstanding. This is evidenced by the persistent understanding of Japanese cultural beliefs and ritual practices as rooted in a kind of theism rather than beginning from the point of an assumption of atheism, which is what I would like to propose be done.

The Chinese word and character for kami, *shen*, 神, when translated into English, has also been rendered as "spirits," "deity," or "gods," and is a part of the kanji which makes up *shendao* and *shinto* – 神道. The sociocultural background of the word rendered into English as "god" within the Chinese context is also very different from the background of god found in the European one. This character was introduced with Chinese contact with the Japanese traditions to describe the phenomenon of kami, which already had an established cultural meaning for the Japanese. This introduction meant the possibility of shifts in thinking about kami that could have come from this contact. Such shifts occur again later with European contact and the introduction of ideas about gods and deities that come from a completely new cultural background. The accommodation of this new view meant an increasingly expansive, ever-changing understanding of what kami are. Again, the concept of kami was affected by linguistic and conceptual connections formed by translation and conceptual exchange which were influenced by differential understandings of what a god or deity is. The word "spirit," I believe, may be a more neutral term for the purposes of translation, but it is not without its own historical uses which could be problematic, depending upon one's cultural context – thus, caution is suggested here as well.

The background of the prior paragraph creates the framework for an argument I wish to make about the relationship the Japanese have with kami which can help elucidate the differences between the idea of kami and that of gods or deities. In fact, what I am proposing is that the phrase "kami worship," long used in literature to describe the interactions of Japanese people with such beings, conveys an incorrect sense of the relationship the Japanese had with kami prior to cultural exchanges that might have subtly altered how people understood those relationships. For my own purposes, I believe that the phrase "kami interaction" more accurately describes that relationship. Some of the changes that are reflected in archaeological evidence provide supportive evidence for this more nuanced description.

The earliest recorded interactions of the *Wa*, 倭, or Japan and its people, as they were called by the early Chinese, during the Yayoi period with ancient

China and its people are documented first in the *Hon Hanshu*, 後漢書, or the *Book of Han*, completed in AD 111. Following this came the *Wei Zhi*, 魏志, *History of the Kingdom of Wei*, written in AD 297, and finally the *Hou Hanshu*, 後漢書, *Book of Later Han*. It is from the ensuing contact described in such texts that the concept of "*tian,*" 天, or heaven enters the Japanese language. The continued contact and influence of Chinese culture and language leads to the development of *man'yōgana*, 万葉仮名, the first written language system produced in Japan. It is from the descriptions of Chinese visitors to Japan and archaeological artifacts that a picture emerges of the kind of relationship the Yayoi and the even earlier Jōmon Japanese had with those known as kami. Helen Hardacre, in her book *Shinto*, points out that the manner in which kami behaved suggested an integral connection with the material world and its rhythms:

> The Kami were strongly identified with natural forces governing the crops. Kami were not originally imagined as having anthropomorphic form or as dwelling permanently in a single place. Instead, they were believed to respond to Human invitations to manifest. Otherwise, they remained formless and invisible. The Kami's association with natural forces gave them an unpredictable quality. Just as nature can produce floods, drought, and epidemic disease, the Kami were not necessarily always beneficent to humanity. They could make erratic appearances, conceptualized as anger or wrath. For this reason, worship mainly took the form of beseeching and placating them, or seeking to avoid their anger. It was only much later that they came to be seen as having compassion for humanity.
>
> (Hardacre 2017, 19)

Hardacre's description provides us with multiple considerations for how people viewed the existence of beings known as kami. Their very existence as formless and invisible but ever-present and available to be invited into the matter of living beings, objects, and phenomena suggests that perhaps their connection to materiality is more complex and immediate than existence in another separate realm might imply. Many historians of Jōmon and Yayoi culture have suggested that aspects of kami interaction during this time had to do with rice cultivation and the demands of life associated with this. If this is accurate, the kami could be more accurately viewed as being immediately present in the material world, rather than separate or apart from it, even if such beings don't always demonstrate concern for human affairs. Furthermore, descriptions of the relationship people had with kami, of asking for things, offering them things, and avoiding their anger sound very much like our own interactions with our fellow human beings. Additionally, there

is little evidence that suggests that there was a conception of a realm apart from the material world, prior to the later introduction of tian described previously, in which the kami resided. This was and is a defining feature of later Jewish, Christian, and Muslim views of God and also of cultures in which pantheons of gods were worshipped, such as the Greeks, Romans, and Norse. Indeed, Japanese cultural practices and beliefs that suggest a spiritual realm apart from the physical world are not readily evident.

Mark Hudson, in "Rice, bronze, and chieftains: an archaeology of Yayoi ritual," notes divination rituals and the use of oracle bones do not appear until the Yayoi period and were likely introduced from Korea (Hudson 1992, 152). Hudson points out that burial rituals shifted during the Yayoi period with the practice of building formal, separate burial areas becoming prevalent during this time in opposition to the Jōmon practice of burying the dead within the limits of settlements (Hudson 1992, 158). In some cases, these burial sites were under home structures in which the living continued to reside. Although certainly inconclusive, one can point out that there were likely to have been reasons underlying the shift in burial practices. The choice to begin to separate the dead from the living certainly seems a material change worthy of examination. Beginning from the position that the dead still have material existence and that they require material support, including space for them among the living as members of the group is an interesting starting point of such an investigation. Add to this the Jōmon practices of burying tools and, later, adornments in such graves with the remains, and there is enough evidence to at least suggest a view of the dead as having changed form but still being in need of material implements. As mentioned previously, it is certainly possible that there existed a belief that the dead were still present and active in material form, some as kami, and could act and have effects upon the material world. Thus, the need for and presentation of material artifacts to them in order to facilitate that continued existence is eminently reasonable. Upon proofreading this chapter for me, a colleague and very dear friend noted that it is also reasonable that the fear of one's dead relatives lurking about and catching you using their favorite tools or other possessions could lead to punishment and might drive actions such as placing those possessions with the dead at the time of burial to avoid temptation.

Additionally, evidence of the presence of what have been classified as magico-religious beliefs comes from translations of Chinese observational accounts of Yayoi-period Japanese ritual practices. *Hou Hanshu* makes observations about such ritualistic behavior focused upon divination performed by the leader of the Wa, Himiko. It was said that she "was involved with 'magic and sorcery'" (Kidder 2007, 18). The Chinese phrasing here, translated into

magic and sorcery, comes from the Tsunoda and Goodrich translation of this text. The Chinese word "*guidao*," 鬼道, translated into "magic and sorcery," has been scrutinized by scholars who disagree as to its origin and what it might refer to (Hudson 1992, 174).[1] Thus we are left with an understanding of Yayoi ritual that comes to us through the language and cultural context of Chinese visitors rather than Japanese practitioners. This should always be kept in mind when we consider whether such an understanding adequately captures the relationship that ancient Japanese understood themselves to have with such beings. The simple answer is that we do not and cannot know and so, like much of the rest of this work, we should be careful to offer explanations commensurate with what we do know and not to become too attached to any one as the answer to the question. This includes considering what kinds of ontological frameworks would have informed the Chinese conceptual language used for such descriptions.

Archaeological evidence from the Yayoi bears out a story of dramatic changes in cultural activity. How this evidence has been interpreted helps to elucidate further the effects of particular paradigms on the understanding of cultural activity surrounding kami, the dead, or realms apart from the material. The attribution of beliefs and practices having to do with the magico-religious have long been the default assumption of scholars examining relevant physical remains of these periods of Japan's history. However, many of these assumptions surrounding such artifacts were made long ago and were based on academic models of cultural comparison that are currently undergoing re-evaluation for their usefulness. What the evidence warrants in terms of supposition is probably much more limited. During the Jōmon period, there is no suggestion that kami were viewed as god-like and, as Hudson suggests, evidence for ritual activity that suggests the existence of a spirit world that could be contacted in order to divine the future or what actions the community or an individual should take does not appear until after the Jōmon period (Hudson 1992). It is not inherently necessary to understand divination as contact with another realm; it can be understood as a form of contact between beings present in the same material world who cannot communicate through other means, much like our use of email or texting is a form of such contact to

1 Hudson notes that both Ueda Masaaki in "The world of the Wa" and Ōbayashi Taryō in "Jomon and Yayoi graves: an ethnographic explanation" question whether this choice of phrasing is rooted in some ways in the Chinese perception and framework for what they observed. Ueda (1976) points out that it might be rooted in a Daoist conceptual context while Ōbayashi (1977) offers a definition for the term as meaning a "type of 'new religion' that suddenly gained popularity at a time of social crisis."

us now. Similarly, the aforementioned burial customs of the Jōmon suggest that we should perhaps consider that death was not a thing set apart from everyday life until the Yayoi period. In fact, what is known about Jōmon artifacts suggests that this earlier period was a time in which people did not view states such as death as being something other than altered states of material existence, and it is certainly possible that their view of the dead included the idea that the dead were still present among the living.

In returning to an examination of the scholarship on the etymology of the word "kami" to assess what has been provided to us for understanding, the word "kami" has had its own sub-area of scholarship developed over the course of the previous century that is reflective of changes to the study of religion overall. There was, for a time, in the history of scholarship on Japanese religious concepts a lively debate over the original meaning and pronunciation of this word. As noted earlier, this word was originally believed to be closest in meaning to "deity" or "god." Early historically comprehensive etymological studies like those of D. C. Holtom favored a distinctly Christian-centered understanding of the meaning of the word and its framework:[2]

> We have examined enough of the evidence to enable us to come to an important conclusion. On the basis of what we have just seen we can state that kami in its characteristic content is a religious term through and through. It is not what some would have us believe it is, a "secular" expression or one that connotes a non-religious or an extra-religious background and meaning. Those who come to such a conclusion must do so either out of ignorance of the facts or because of the intrusion of circumstances that lie outside of strictly objective study and which necessitate a more or less consciously applied accommodation. If we accept the guidance of the Japanese experts whom we have been following – and everything points to the decision that we must – then kami is a word which in origin and development is saturated with the atmosphere of the Divine, the Sacred, and the Holy. It calls forth emotions of awe and mystery, of restraint and dedication, of dependence and obligation, that are characteristically religious. Further, Japanese scholars who have most profoundly explored the depths of this concept have done so with exactly the same kind of critical apparatus – historical and psychological – that has been used by Western scholars in searching out the fundamental aspects of the religious life elsewhere . . . But we know too that the primary emotions which the term kami registers are not exclusively Japanese, but rather they are attributes of universal human nature. (Holtom 1940b, 53)

2 A very long and exhaustive examination of the etymology of the word "kami" and its associated ideograms, and the tracing of its history in Japanese literature, was done in two parts by D. C. Holtom in *Monumenta Nipponica* in January and July of 1940.

Critical changes in self-reflection coupled with a greater understanding of the hegemonic effects of colonialism over the way scholarship is conducted happened over time, and have led to a shift in how potentialities for meaning are considered and, consequently, for what the term "kami" might have meant for early Japanese. Exactly what word it was originally, its origins, or what other words it might be related to have also been examined in close detail with no conclusive answers provided. Meanwhile, scholarship considering the changes to the meaning of the word based on historical circumstances has been ongoing. Inoue Nobutaka provides interesting insights into the historical record of the translation of kami into god due to the effects of Christian thought entering Japan (Inoue 1998, 4).

It is worth noting that some recent scholarship on such concepts has looked to the Ainu word "kamuy" as providing possible clues as to the etymology of kami. Treso Nonno has theorized that the words "ramat" and "kamuy" are like concepts, much like kami and tamashii, 魂, and that these Ainu terms, kamuy and ramat, were the origin of the Japanese words, kami and tamashii, respectively.

Tamashii, like kami, has several different meanings, including spirit, mind, vigor, and willpower, and is a concept often found in conjunction with kami. Similarly, Nonno notes that ramat is an Ainu word meaning something like "energy that fills the universe" or "vital energy," while kamuy is a thing filled with this energy (Nonno 2015, 24). Nonno notes the etymological relations of ramat and tamashii, indicating that they are both pervasive energies that fill kami or kamuy. Writing on kami suggests that anything, including ordinary humans, can be filled with this energy (Nonno 2015, 32–4).

Other suggestions for the roots of the word kami and its representative ideograms are voluminous but, in addition to referring to ideas that could be thought of as religious, in the sense that religion is seen as a present force acting in and on cultures, there are also suggestions that could be thought of as having nothing to do with anything that we traditionally think of as religious. Examples include a "bright or glorious appearing," a "feeling of awe/dread/anxiety/unease," and, one of the most interesting in this writer's opinion, "hidden person."

Given this, it may help to turn to an examination of relevant additional concepts, from within their ontological frameworks, that the Chinese brought with them and introduced to those known as the Wa. According to the *Hou Honshu*, sustained contact worthy of written record occurred first in the year AD 57, when the emperor gave a golden seal to Wa. This dynastic

period, known as the Han, 漢朝, had its own distinctive ideas related to relevant understandings of tian and a related term, *di*, 帝. Di was a term that had been used in the Zhou Dynasty, 周, prior to the Han, to refer to the great god. During the Han it became a general term of reference rather than a specific name, referring to god or gods, according to Ruth H. Chang in "Understanding *Di* and *Tian*: deity and heaven from Shang to Tang Dynasties" (Chang 2000, 19). Chang notes that other scholars have also translated this word as "thearch," referring to specific or idealized rulers (Chang 2000, 19). During this period the word "tian" was not far distant from the meaning it had during the Zhou period, while also adding new meanings for the term, referring to a group of ancestral gods, the heavens, the sky itself, and also a kind of fate. Even given the conceptual separation of humans from heaven, there are important connections, described in the literature which indicate the nature of the relationship between humans and the heavens. The heavens were the source of humans and of the superior power of the emperor, as the concept *tianzi,* 天子, or son of heaven, a name given to the emperor, indicates. Given this ontological arrangement, the emperor shared a familial relationship to the humans in his domain which ensured the continuity of the familial relations between heaven and the people (Chang 2000, 24). However, new meanings were also added during this time. It is a minimal claim to suggest that tian and the human world were separate places.

It was this complicated ontology that was introduced to Yayoi Japanese from Han Dynasty China. This would have been the conceptual framework from which Han Dynasty Chinese understood kami, and this conceptual framework would end up playing an influential role in the development of the earliest kana system of Japan, *man'yōgana,* 万葉仮名. It was also through variations upon the Chinese written language that the first histories of Japan were produced. The preface of the *Kojiki* was written in Chinese, with other portions written in *hentai kanbun,* 変体漢文, or deviant Chinese, and then other portions written phonographically. The *Nihon Shoki* is written similarly, except that it is primarily in classical Chinese.

The idea of kami being existent in a realm apart from the one that humans inhabit would have been completely understandable to the Han Chinese, who were the first to capture the rituals of the Yayoi Japanese in writing. The idea that tian was a place where the mysterious powers and deities that control the universe reside, and thus a place where the kami themselves resided, would not have seemed unusual to them either. It would also not have been without precedent to find the use of tian in reference to the

physical sky, as Chang notes. In discussing the *Huainanzi*, 淮南子, *The Writings of the Huainian Masters*, she points out that in the third chapter of the text there are references to tian as a physical sky: "'Heaven' (tian) is something similar to the physical sky or heavens, filled with the sun, moon, and planets. It is something that is created – not something that creates" (Chang 2000, 22). Later, Chang notes that even if tian is not the physical sky, the chapter in question makes it clear that it is a geographical realm that can be measured and has a shape, and at the same time is a heavenly divine realm set apart from the world of humans (Chang 2000). This ambiguity and simultaneity of conceptual understandings for tian made it a very adaptable concept. Its appearance in later Japanese written works describing the abodes of the celestial kami who inhabit physical spaces in the world and yet exist in a heaven carries with it the same kinds of explanations that we see in the *Huainanzi*. Yet, it appears as though there are elements of belief that surround the kami that do not align perfectly with the Chinese view and suggest a reliance on a much closer relationship between kami and humans than the kind of separation between humans and the divine rulers that must be bridged by the emperor in Chinese mythology. Havens notes:

> The earliest records locate Buddhist objects of worship firmly within the conceptual vocabulary of the native Japanese *kami* concept, calling the Buddha a "neighboring *kami*" or "foreign *kami*."
>
> The Japanese worldview did involve two aspects or phases, a "visible world" (*kenkai*) and "invisible world" (*yûkai*), but these two realms were not metaphysically distinct. Instead, as Muraoka Tsunetsugu notes, "While we say the *yûkai* was invisible, it was thought of as having substance like a kind of shadow." *Yûkai* was thus sometimes conceived of as a place distantly removed, but still on this earth. Even the "otherworldly" realms of Takamagahara, the High Plain of Heaven populated by the heavenly *kami* and Tokoyo (the "everlasting world"), were "portrayed in outline as extensions or reflections of the phenomenal world and were not glorified as having a greater value than the human world." (Havens 1998, 3–4)

Furthermore, Havens points out:

> The "pure lands" of Buddhism were likewise not comprehended as transcendent states, but physical places located somewhere on an extension from everyday life. In the Heian period, funereal boats were thus launched from Kumano in the conviction that their occupants would reach the Pure Land of the bodhisattva Kannon, and some Buddhist followers even set off themselves in similar small craft, sacrificing themselves in the belief that the Pure Land lay just over the ocean. (Havens 1998, 4)

It does not appear to this writer that there is justification for claiming an ancient understanding of kami as spirit or energy that exists in a realm apart from the material world that humans inhabit or as a god or deity that exists in such a realm. Given that the man'yōgana, as a written language, was the Japanese spoken language transliterated into Chinese ideograms, the choices for which ideograms would be most appropriate for which Japanese linguistic concepts would have been inevitably influenced by the adoption of Chinese language and perhaps the Korean understandings[3] of the meaning of such concepts. It should be of little surprise to us, then, that the choices in terminology to describe the kami or their dwelling places would include Chinese concepts that did not share the same meaning as the ones used in Japan prior to the appearance of written language.

I have established that an approach to understanding the kami concept prior to the introduction of the first writing system that supposes that kami interaction involves the material world, rather than presupposing a spiritual realm for which adequate historical evidence does not exist, is supported by both evidence and by a parsimonious understanding of that evidence. Given this, it seems a rather limited claim to suggest that such interactions might be described as atheistic, given a broadened understanding of atheism. In fact, rather than a supposition of a spiritual realm where the kami reside, one can make the more limited claim that, for Yayoi Japanese, the material world is inhabited by many types of beings, some seen and some unseen. Norman Havens points out: "Whatever *kami* was used to mean, it did not refer – at least in ancient times – to beings of a *metaphysically* distinct category" (Havens 1998, 3). Discussion of the burial of valuable artifacts, indicating the social status or material social position of the dead, can also be explained in ways that have not been explored in great detail previously. Finally, we have noted that the etymology of kami is not clear and that there are many possible meanings and origins for this word in ancient Japan, none of which make a necessary connection to a realm apart from the material world. Each of these facts on their own does not necessarily give us a picture of atheism in ancient Japan. However, taken collectively, they offer new possibilities for understanding atheism in this sociohistorical context in Japan as the absence of a belief in God or gods and/or a belief that everything that exists does so within the material realm.

3 For an interesting exploration of the possible connections of man'yōgana to Paekche (ancient Korea), John R. Bentley's "The origin of Man'yōgana," published in 2001 in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* provides a detailed account.

Rather than continuing to rely upon an understanding of atheism as something defined by the presence of its opposite – theism – present efforts at deconstruction in the area of method and theory in the study of religion have freed us to be able to find new ways of thinking about atheism and to entertain the notion that it might not have to be preceded by or understood in relation to theistic thinking. In the case of ancient Japanese culture, perhaps atheism came first.

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5

Ancient Greece

TIM WHITMARSH

The modern word 'atheist' derives from ancient Greek – *theos* means 'god', and the prefix *a-* denotes absence. The word *atheos* is first encountered in poetic texts of the fifth century BC, where it means something like 'god-forsaken' or 'impious', and is used of those who are thought to be uncivilized or in some other way beyond the pale. For example, in Aeschylus' earliest surviving play, *Persians* (472 BC), the defeat of Xerxes' army is said to be requital for 'their outrageous actions and godless (*atheos*) arrogance' (808). In later Greek literature, however, particularly in prose texts, the word took on an additional meaning close to the modern one – that is, 'lacking in belief in the gods'. This meaning is first attested unequivocally in Plato's *Apology of Socrates* (26c), his reconstruction of the great philosopher's defence speech when he was tried on the grounds of religious impropriety and corrupting the young. Plato's text was probably composed within fifteen years of the historical trial in 399 BC, but the usage in this sense is almost certainly older, dating to the later part of the fifth century BC.[1] The abstract noun 'atheism' (*atheotēs*; later *atheia*) is not securely attested in the sense of disbelief until considerably later, in the first century BC: again it is likely to be older, but perhaps not much.[2]

All translation, however, carries risks. Atheos did not mean exactly the same thing as our 'atheist'. For one thing, it seems largely to have retained its negative connotation, and to have been used primarily as an outgroup label by those who wished to stigmatize certain thinkers as heterodox in their religious attitudes. Moreover, ancient Greek 'atheists' differed from their

1 It is very likely the intended meaning already in a passage of Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria* (671), a play first performed in 411 BC. Generally on ancient disbelief and atheism see: Decharme 1904; Drachmann 1922; Ley 1966; Dorival and Pralon 2002; Cancik-Lindemaier 2006; Bremmer 2007; Sedley 2013a, 2013b; Whitmarsh 2015.

2 Arius Didymus 25 Tsouni. It is possible that Clitomachus' second-century collection of 'atheistic' arguments (see below) was entitled *On Atheism* (*atheotēs*).

modern counterparts to the degree that ancient Greek religion differed from the modern, western monotheisms – and Protestant Christianity in particular – that have been so formative in every realm of modern, western thought. Since Christianity is predicated on a belief in a single, omnipotent deity, atheism is assumed to consist in lack of belief in that same deity. Ancient Greek religion, however, was polytheistic, and built more around collective ritual than individual belief. As a result, the term was used more capaciously: sometimes in a sense closer to the modern one (i.e. disbelief in any kind of deity whatsoever), and sometimes more broadly to refer to a stance that was more nebulously sceptical towards established religion. Finally, not all instances of ancient Greek 'atheism' are explicitly marked as *atheos*: sometimes other terms or phrases are used; sometimes there is no indicative term at all. That is to say, one more major difference between the modern 'atheist' and the ancient Greek *atheos* is that whereas the former is the dominant term in its culture, the latter is not.

I begin with the question of language because it helps us confront a central methodological difficulty facing any attempt at this kind of 'cultural archaeology'. A large number of modern abstractions have been formed in dialogue with Greek antiquity, particularly in the period after the Enlightenment. This can lead to a false sense of familiarity. Terms may be etymologically ancient but semantically modern. It is therefore crucial to insist that ancient concepts should be understood on their own terms. But an overemphasis on untranslatability also has its perils. Particularly in the heyday of cultural constructionism, in the 1990s, it was fashionable to question or even ban the use of all modern terminology – be it 'sexuality', 'art', or 'technology' – on the grounds of anachronism.[3] Underlying this issue of language is often a more significant one about ontology: for example, from the observation there is no exact equivalent word for 'homosexuality' in Greek antiquity it has been concluded that there were no homosexuals in Greek antiquity (on the grounds that the word should be used only of cultures that have the concept).[4] This kind of cultural-constructionist fundamentalism, manifesting itself as an extreme nominalism, is both reductive and simplistic. Of course, different cultures organize themselves in different ways; but it does not follow from this that human experience is so discontinuous across time and space that modern terms cannot be applied (with suitable nuance).

3 Nongbri (2013). Banning 'religion' represents a recent return to this dogma.

4 See, e.g. Halperin (1990) for this position, and the counterargument of Davidson (2008). Halperin's position is not, of course, that no ancient Greek desired someone of the same sex, but that the cultural organization of this desire was so unlike modern homosexuality that the same term cannot cover both.

To avoid the Scylla of 'presentism' (i.e. the unreflective imposition of modern concepts) and the Charybdis of radical nominalism, the classicist Nicole Loraux argued for what she called 'controlled anachronism' (Loraux 1993). This will be the methodology adopted in this chapter. It is clear that there is no exact correspondence between the modern concept of 'atheism' – forged in the post-Enlightenment, secular, Christian-influenced west, albeit under the influence of Greco-Roman ideas – and ancient Greek *atheotēs*. It is, however, also demonstrably true that there were in Greek antiquity 'atheists' in a sense that we would recognize today, just as there have no doubt been in every culture throughout history. To call these people 'atheists' is, for sure, in one sense anachronistic: but our aim should be to control that anachronism, and thereby to test for continuities and differences.

Archaic Greece

Classicists generally divide Greek culture prior to Christian late antiquity into four eras: archaic (*c.* 800 to 500 BC), classical (*c.* 499 to 323 BC), Hellenistic (*c.* 322 to 31 BC), and Roman (*c.* 31 BC to AD 312). The boundaries of these eras are defined politically: the archaic marks the emergence of the Greek world's distinctive *polis* (city-state) structure; the classical covers roughly the period of Athenian democracy; the Hellenistic that of the Greek empires that sprang up in the aftermath of the conquests of Alexander the Great; and the Roman the period when the entirety of the Greek world was subject to Roman rule (and Rome was governed by emperors). These distinctions are, naturally, to a degree arbitrary; but since ancient Greek atheism came in and out of focus over long stretches of time, it will be helpful to follow a chronological narrative.

Although the earliest demonstrably Greek texts (written in so-called Linear B) date from the mid-second millennium BC, ancient Greek culture as we understand it today began to take shape in the eighth century BC: it was during this period that the pan-Hellenic ('all-Greek') sanctuaries of Olympia and Delphi were apparently founded, and the epic poems of Homer and Hesiod (which had much older oral roots) first began to crystallize. Hesiod's *Theogony* tells of the creation of the universe and the ascendance to dominance of the Olympian gods, led by their king Zeus. Zeus' rule is presented as necessary to maintain cosmic stability, and as an analogy for the rule of the 'kings' (really closer to feudal lords) who guarantee stability in human communities. The Hesiodic *Works and Days* offers a grim portrait of breadline existence in a peasant community, where farmers are subject to toil,

mortality, fickle kinsmen, the depredations of 'gift-devouring kings', and the economic drain of marriage. The Homeric poems, narratives of the Trojan War and its aftermath, describe a cosmos in which a multitude of capricious, anthropomorphic gods intervene regularly in human affairs to influence events in ways that they choose. Often these deities have human-like psychologies: they feel anger, desire, and sadness. Sometimes they represent natural principles (Apollo's arrows bring plague; Hephaestus sends fire). Humans sacrifice to gods in attempts – not always successful – to win their favour.

This early epic is theistic in tenor – as one would expect from poetry composed for public performance, including at major religious festivals. The one figure who might be held to be 'atheistic' is the *Odyssey*'s Cyclops Polyphemus, who states that 'the Cyclopes pay no heed to Zeus, who bears the aegis, nor to the blessed gods, since truly we are better far than they' (*Odyssey* 9.275–6). 'Paying no heed to' gods does not, of course, mean disbelieving in them (nor would one expect Poseidon's son to be a disbeliever); but it does fit the broader, Greek conception of atheism.[5] This exception proves the general rule, for Polyphemus is presented as the most extreme example of improper, uncivilized behaviour.

Nevertheless, the *Iliad* in particular presents a number of cases of humans challenging gods without any long-term consequences: Helen protests to Aphrodite forcefully about her treatment (book 3), Diomedes wounds Aphrodite and Ares on the battlefield (despite having been told by Athena not to attack gods; books 5 and 6), and Achilles takes on the river-god Scamander (book 21). Archaic Greek poetry displays a remarkably high tolerance for humans who stand up to the gods. In a now-fragmentary poem called *The Catalogue of Women* we encounter a mythical family, the early descendants of Aeolus (the progenitor of the 'Aeolians', one branch of the broader Greek ethnos) who seem to have had a particular propensity for such irreligious behaviour. Sisyphus sought to conquer death; Ceyx and Alcyone fell so deeply in love with each other that they called themselves 'Zeus' and 'Hera'; most striking of all is Salmoneus, king of Elis, who sought to put himself on a level with Zeus, imitating his thunder by banging pots and pans behind his chariot, and his lightning by throwing torches in the sky like a kind of impresario (Whitmarsh 2018). This kind of contumely towards the divine inevitably does not go down well with the gods, who always reassert

5 Aristonicus, an ancient commentator on the text, labels Polyphemus an atheist (Σ Hom. *Od.* 9.275).

their authority. But rather than seeing such narratives in straightforwardly protreptic terms of crime and punishment (a framework that risks importing the Christian idea of sin), it is better to consider them as exploratory and experimental. Myth is not crudely moralistic: it is a supple medium for thinking in creative ways about problems in cosmology and theology. These stories acknowledge that some humans do not accept their own mortality, or the authority of the gods: they judge them negatively, for sure, but not before they have savoured the challenges they pose to conventional thought.

In the later archaic period we find the emergence of the so-called Presocratic philosophers: first of all in Ionia (the western coast of what is now Turkey), then in southern Italy, and finally (in the classical period) in Athens.[6] The Presocratics were interested primarily in physics and cosmology – in the stuff of the universe. They moved away from mythical models of creation based in anthropomorphism, positing instead mechanistic and materialist models of the physical world, often conjoined with an abstract, heno- or even monotheistic conception of deity. Many were 'monists', which is to say that they proposed that the nature of the universe could be explained by positing the primordiality of one particular substance (water, air, fire, etc.). The most striking of these for the history of atheism is Xenophanes of Colophon (in Ionia), who in the mid-sixth century dismissed mythical stories as 'fictions' (*plasmata*) and argued against Homeric and Hesiodic depictions of gods. The central problem with these mythical gods is that they are simply projections of mortal concerns: 'Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things that are shameful and reproachable among humans: stealing, adultery and deceit'; 'Mortals think gods are born and have clothing, voice and body just like them'; 'Now if cows, horses or lions had hands, and were able to draw with those hands and create things as humans do, horses would draw gods in the form of horses, and cows in the form of cows, and create bodies just like they had' (Xenophanes fragments 9.22, 29, 31, 32, and 33 in Graham 2010).

Xenophanes was at first sight very far from being an atheist: his cosmology was built around the principle of 'one god', who was unmoving, unchanging, uncreated, and eternal, and who caused other things to move through the power of his mind (Fragments 35, 37, 38, 41, 42 in Graham 2010). Yet the divinity he recognized was not only new to conventional Greek religion but also completely new in kind. Xenophanes' god was the agent behind change

6 See Long (1999) and Warren (2007).

and growth in nature. There is no sign that he thought this god was responsive to human prayer or ritual; he certainly rejected the value of prophecy (Fragments 43, 44 in Graham 2010). By redefining the concept of godhead in this way, Xenophanes in effect dismissed the value of all existing cults.

Once the twin ideas of mechanistic materialism and the rejection of anthropomorphic gods had taken hold, it was – one might have thought – only a small step to full atheism. Yet to our knowledge only one Presocratic came close (though another, to be discussed in the next section, was also associated with atheism). In the fifth century, we are told, Hippo of Samos (now a shadowy figure) proposed a fully material cosmos, with apparently no place for the gods. He also seems to have rejected the idea of a human soul.[7]

The Classical Period

The evidence for the thought of archaic Greece is always scattered and sketchy. Ideas need to be reconstructed either from later sources or from complex, multilayered poems. We lack biographical data, by and large: most individuals we hear of are now just names. That all changes in the classical period – at least for Athens, the largest and most powerful city in the Mediterranean (and quite possibly the world) at the time. Now we have robust historical data, dates, and rich contexts. We also have strong evidence, for the first time, for the existence of 'atheists' in something like the modern sense (Hippo of Samos, although a 'Presocratic' philosopher, belongs in this era). Even so, that evidence is not remotely straightforward: much of it is hostile or preserved in later sources.

The pivotal era for Athenian atheism began in the late 430s BC. Athens' wealth, power, and receptivity to intellectual experimentalism (nurtured in part by its democratic governance) made it a magnet for teachers and thinkers from across the Greek-speaking world. Despite the onset in 431 BC of war with the Spartans (who would eventually emerge victorious), Athens now became the philosophical heir to the Presocratic legacy. This new environment explored multiple different ideas, including materialism (an obvious Presocratic inheritance), cultural relativism, and social constructionism. All of these fields were fertile for the growth of atheistic ideas.

Arguably the most important (if only accidentally so) figure in the history of ancient Greek atheism was Anaxagoras, originally from Colophon (the same city as Xenophanes). Anaxagoras proposed a largely materialistic model

7 See Shapiro (1999).

of the cosmos, which was animated by an entity that he called *Nous* ('mind'). *Nous* shared features in common with a providential designer-god, but was never (at least in our extant fragments) described as such by Anaxagoras himself. Most controversial of all was, apparently, his claim that the celestial bodies were composed of matter, and particularly that the Sun was a flaming lump of iron ore (Anaxagoras fragment 1 in Graham, 2010). This claim in itself should not have caused so much outrage. Although there were cults of Helios (the solar deity) in the Greek world, the planets and stars were not routinely worshipped. Later sources tell us, however, that the enemies of the Athenian general Pericles, a friend of Anaxagoras', cooked up charges against the latter in order to get at the former. According to Plutarch, writing some 500 years later, a fanatical prophet called Diopeithes

> brought in a bill providing for the public impeachment of such as did not cultivate the affairs of the gods (*ta theia*), or who taught doctrines regarding the heavens, directing suspicion at Pericles by means of Anaxagoras.
>
> (Plutarch, *Pericles* 32.2)

Every aspect of Plutarch's claim has been debated; some have even argued that Diopeithes' indictment can never have taken place. Yet there are good reasons to credit its historicity – even if Plutarch (or the now-lost source on which he depended) seems to have mangled the chronology of events.[8] The impeachment probably occurred in the late 430s BC. Arguably, Diopeithes' decree created two new categories: not just 'atheists' ('such as did not cultivate the affairs of the gods'), but also 'religion' itself. If Plutarch accurately preserves the wording of the original decree, this was apparently the first use in this sense of the phrase *ta theia*, 'matters to do with the gods', which was to become the standard expression for religious practice, expertise, and belief.

Diopeithes' phrasing is notoriously vague; I have sought to capture this vagueness in the necessarily ungainly translation 'did not cultivate the affairs of the gods'. Did he refer narrowly to failure to follow proper ritual? Or to the absence of belief in the gods?[9] The context suggests the latter: it was specifically the 'doctrines regarding the heavens' that were the problem. Nevertheless, the phrasing, capacious as it was, was perhaps intended to sweep up a wide variety of religious malfeasance.

Anaxagoras seems to have survived by fleeing Athens. Diopeithes' decree was at one level ineffective: if anything it seems to have catalysed a wave of

8 On the historicity of the Diopeithes decree, see Whitmarsh (2020).
9 Fahr (1969) demonstrates that the phrasing could refer to either.

interest in modes of religious scepticism in Athens in the 420s BC. Protagoras of Abdera wrote a work, *On the Gods*, of which we have only the opening words: 'Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be. Many things prevent knowledge including the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life' (Protagoras fragment 21 in Graham 2010). This is often taken as an expression of agnosticism, and indeed it was; but it was more than this. Protagoras was a relativist and believed there was no objective knowledge possible: if you say the water is hot, for example, and I say it is cold, then (assuming we are not lying about our sensations) both of our statements are true for each of us. For Protagoras to say that he did not know whether the gods exist or not was, therefore, to affirm that they did not exist for him – and therefore that they did not exist.

Prodicus of Ceos, meanwhile, came up with a theory of the origin of religion as a social practice: the beings worshipped as gods were in fact originally human beings who discovered things of great benefit for humans: Demeter (usually thought of as the goddess of agriculture) was the first maker of bread, Dionysus that of wine, and so forth. This theory would later be developed by Euhemerus of Messene; Prodicus can thus be considered the first 'euhemerizing' (i.e. rationalizing) theorist of religion (Heinrichs 1975).

Diagoras of Melos was the most famous of all the ancient atheists: his name was already in his own lifetime a byword for religious scepticism.[10] We know, however, next to nothing about his ideas. It is possible that he devised an early version of what is now known as the 'argument from evil': if there are gods in the world, how is it that malefactors go unpunished?[11] Diagoras appears to have been one of those accused of mockery of the mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis in 415 BC, and exiled from Athens as a result.[12]

The currency of atheistic ideas in Athens can best be gauged from drama. Theatre in Athens was not high culture, available only to the elite – it was entertainment of the people. Tragedy and comedy are full of reflections on divine disbelief. The evidence for Diagoras' argument mentioned above, for example, derives from a fragment of Euripides' *Bellerophon* (written before 425 BC). In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (perhaps written around 428 BC), Oedipus and particularly Jocasta express their disbelief (misguided, as it

10 'In 414 "Melos" and "Melian" had two primary political echoes for the Athenian audience . . . The most literal came, of course, from the Athenian invasion of 416. Yet two years later, in 414, at Athens, and in a dramatic context of hostility to the traditional gods, "Melian" also resonated from the recent expulsion of Diagoras the Melian for *asebeia*' (Romer 1994, 352).

11 On the evidence for the attribution of this claim to him, see Whitmarsh (2016).

12 In general, see Winiarczyk (2016).

proves) in the validity of oracles. The comic poet Aristophanes likes to depict atheism as a modern fad embraced by anyone who is remotely up with the times. In *Knights*, one slave is surprised by the other's belief in gods; in *Clouds*, a parody of modish intellectual trends, a father mocks his son for believing in the existence of Zeus (*Knights*, 30–5; *Clouds*, 818–19). It is the tragic poet Euripides, the butt of much of Aristophanes' half-admiring humour, who in particular is held to have 'persuaded people that gods don't exist' (Aristophanes, 450–1).[13] Arguably the most radically atheistic passage in the whole of Greco-Roman literature comes in the form of a speech delivered in a drama (probably either a tragedy or a satyr play) called *Sisyphus*, written either by Euripides or by Critias: invoking among other things the Anaxagorean idea of the Sun as a lump of iron, the speaker argues that gods were the invention of a cunning individual concerned to restrict wrongdoing: realizing that laws only rectify public criminality, he invented the idea of gods so as to inhibit private behaviour.[14]

Diopeithes' decree seems to have been short-lived. There are many later accounts of prosecutions of intellectuals in Athens on the grounds of atheism, but most of them are fanciful. Yet it did have one notable after-effect. In 399 BC, the most celebrated philosopher of all, Socrates, was tried and convicted on the grounds of 'not cultivating the gods that the city cultivates, and corrupting the young'. The use of the phrase 'cultivating the gods' echoes Diopeithes 'cultivating the affairs of the gods'. While it is unlikely that Socrates was tried under exactly Diopeithes' law, it is clear that the indictment contained a reference to it. Indeed, in Plato's version of Socrates' defence speech, Socrates quizzes his prosecutor in the matter of his alleged disbelief in gods, claiming that he (Socrates) believes that the Sun and the Moon are gods 'just as everyone else does', and asking 'do you think it is Anaxagoras that you're prosecuting'?

Classical Athens was paradoxical in its handling of atheism: on the one hand it incubated, nurtured, and celebrated intellectual experimentalism, including in matters of religion; on the other hand it turned periodically to repressiveness, using the law and state violence to suppress it. Much of the reason for the latter tendency had to do with politics, and with the anxiety engendered by the long war with Sparta. It is notable that each of the three prosecutions I have mentioned occurred at a pivotal moment in the war. Diopeithes targeted Anaxagoras at the time of the outbreak of hostilities;

13 cf. *Frogs* 836.
14 *TrGF* 1 (43) F 19 = B 25 DK. See Whitmarsh (2014), with further literature.

Diagoras was prosecuted at a time when the state finances were perilously low, and on the eve of the ill-fated expedition to try to conquer Sicily; Socrates was tried and executed after the fall of the brutal 30-man junta imposed by Sparta as one of the prices for victory. Atheists (real or imagined) were no doubt easy targets for a state looking for scapegoats to galvanize the community in times of crisis.

The Hellenistic and Roman Periods

The conquests of Alexander the Great (356 to 323 BC) redrew the map of the Greek world: the city-states that were so characteristic of Greek society were now locked together into large empires and federations, often stretching well beyond the bounds of the Greek peninsula. These empires were ruled by powerful kings and queens, who were sometimes treated as gods. Support for intellectuals now came primarily from royal patronage.

Euhemerus of Messene – already mentioned as an inheritor of the ideas of Prodicus – was one such individual.[15] He wrote in the early third century BC, apparently in Alexandria, Alexander's new Egyptian capital, ruled over by the dynasty known as the Ptolemies. His *Sacred History* was a fictional tale of an expedition undertaken into the Indian Ocean allegedly at the behest of King Cassander of Macedon. He landed, he tells us, on a utopian island called Panchaea, where an inscription carved onto a gold pillar told of the exploits of celebrated men and women of the past – known to us now as the Olympian deities. In particular, Zeus was a great Cretan king called Zan. Like Prodicus, then, Euhemerus destabilized confidence in the divinity of the 'gods' by recourse to a model of posited historical development whereby naturalistic stories were over time corrupted into fanciful misunderstandings (a common strategy among post-mythical Greeks for making sense of their supernatural legacy; thus, for example, stories about centaurs could be understood as the result of misunderstanding accounts of the first horse riders, and so forth). Euhemerus' major development – in addition to the adoption of a new literary form, fictional prose – was the additional reflection upon the divinization of rulers, a feature imported from contemporary political life: Alexander the Great was worshipped in Alexandria, along with the Ptolemies themselves (from at least the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, ruled 283 to 46 BC).

15 See, in general, Winiarczyk (2013).

The Hellenistic period also saw the increasing institutionalization and consolidation of the primary Athenian philosophical schools, the Academy (inaugurated by Plato) and the Lyceum (by Aristotle). In addition, it saw a number of new schools, also mostly concentrated in Athens. Some came and went, like the Cyrenaics (named after the Libyan city of Cyrene), who privileged pleasure and the senses; among their number was one Theodorus, who gained a reputation for atheism (though little is now known of his thought). Two new schools, however, took root and exerted long-lasting influence on Greek culture: Stoicism (named for the *Stoa Poikile* or 'painted colonnade') and Epicureanism. Epicureans would become heavily associated with atheism in the mind of later Greeks; and indeed, since the Renaissance the reception of Epicurean ideas (principally through his Roman follower the poet Lucretius) has been formative on modern conceptions of secularism and atheism.[16]

Epicurus (who came to Athens from the island of Samos in around 306 BC) had an entirely materialist view of the world, proposing that the cosmos consists of nothing more than material atoms and void. He also argued that there was no providence in the cosmos – things happened the way they did because of nature, not gods – and that there was no afterlife. He did, however, insist that atheists ('those who eliminate the divine from reality') were mad, specifically naming Prodicus, Diagoras, and Critias (Philodemus, *On Piety* 19, 519–33). His gods had no role to play in the world, however: they did not intervene in human affairs, and lived in remote, separate places. How exactly he conceived of the gods remains unclear. We know that he claimed they were made of rarefied ('superfine') atoms; but did he think they were subject to decay and ultimate dissolution, as (according to his model) all other things in the universe are? Did he think they lived in 'real' space or, as some of his followers believed, in the gaps between worlds? Did he think of them as real beings at all, or as images of perfection to which we as human beings should aspire? None of his extant writings clarify the issue, and the fullest surviving exposition of his doctrine – Lucretius' magisterial *On the Nature of Things* – does not address the matter. Perhaps Epicurus himself was conflicted. Maybe even a century after the trial of Socrates, Athens was still not receptive to the idea of philosophical atheists; or perhaps he was simply too personally attached to the idea of divinity to let go of it. There is, indeed, a further twist to the story: Epicurus himself was (according to his own testamentary instructions) honoured by his followers with annual birthday

16 See, especially, Turner (1973); Gillespie and Mackenzie (2010); Greenblatt (2011).

celebrations, in a ritual that came close to treating him as a god. Lucretius, indeed, calls him 'a god – a god, I tell you' (Lucretius 5.8). How exactly we are to read this claim is unclear: was it to be taken literally and pietistically, or as a subversive ironization of the very concept of divinity?

Epicureanism was not just a philosophy; it was a way of life, teaching its adherents how to remain calm and happy in the face of an unpredictable world, and how to value friendship and community. It remained a vital force in Greek culture for over 600 years. Under the reign of the Emperor Hadrian (AD 117–38), what is now the largest inscription to survive from the ancient world was incised, in the Lycian town of Oenoanda (in southern Turkey). Originally 25,000 words long and covering 260 m of space, it lays out an Epicurean treatise composed by one Diogenes. Following the lead of Epicurus himself, Diogenes insists that 'it is not we who remove the gods, but others', naming Diagoras and Protatoras (although the surviving parts of the inscription give us no better answers to the question of how gods might have operated within an Epicurean physics) (Column 16). Despite their best efforts, however, Epicureans continued to be associated strongly with atheism in the popular imagination, as the satirical works of Lucian of Samosata (again second century AD) make clear. One of Lucian's comic dialogues, *Zeus the Tragedian*, dramatizes the gods listening in to a human debate between a Stoic and an Epicurean on – precisely – the question of the existence or not of deities. It is the Epicurean who argues against.

In the late Hellenistic period we also find the first indications of an awareness of atheism as a coherent stance in its own right, as distinct from the specific views of individuals who might be considered atheist. Hellenistic and Roman-era philosophy is characterized by, among other things, a desire to aggregate and systematize the thoughts of earlier thinkers. This was an era of classicism, when Greeks became aware of themselves as stewards of a vast cultural legacy. The classical atheists therefore became a kind of canon, and their ideas could now be imagined as parts of an interlocking whole. A pivotal figure in this connection with Clitomachus, who became head of Plato's Academy in the 120s BC. The Academy at this time favoured Scepticism, a doctrine promoting the idea that for every positive argument that *x* was the case there was an equipollent counter-argument that it was not; thus, the optimal intellectual position was one of informed neutrality. Among Clitomachus' very many works (over 400, according to one report) was a book on the gods, which compiled arguments both for and against the existence of gods, some deriving from the philosophical classics and some from his Sceptic predecessor Carneades.[17]

17 See Winiarczyk (1976).

Many of these fiendishly subtle arguments are paraphrased in book 9 of Sextus Empiricus' *Against the Mathematicians* (second century AD). For example, Carneades applied to gods the so-called 'heaping argument'. The heaping argument is designed to attack the idea of secure definition. In its basic form it runs as follows. A grain is not a heap. Nor is two. Nor is three (and so forth). At some point there will be enough grains to make a heap; but there is no point at which adding one grain will convert the assemblage from a not-heap to a heap. Therefore, there is no secure definition of a heap. Carneades ingeniously argued the same principle to gods, using the example of water. Achelous, a river in western Greece, was held to be a god, and so was the Nile. Why then was every river not a god? And where do we stop? Are streams and rivulets gods too? How much water current is needed to qualify for divinity? Since the question cannot be answered, Carneades concluded, the concept of deity is undefinable.[18]

Since Clitomachus was a Sceptic, his collection of atheistic arguments had to be counterbalanced by positive arguments for the existence of divinity. We do, however, know of the existence of one purely atheistic pamphlet, which has been aggregated into a philosophical compendium mistakenly attributed by the manuscript tradition to Plutarch (but probably the work of one Aëtius, a thinker of the second century AD). This not only names Diagoras, Euhemerus, and Euripides (the credited author of the 'Sisyphus fragment'), but also adds specific arguments (against the concepts of divine omnipotence and creator-gods); and returns to the problem of the existence of unchecked injustice.[19] This pamphlet is the world's earliest surviving (but perhaps not the world's first) *God Delusion*: a text dedicated, solely and non-doctrinally, to demonstrating the non-existence of divinity.

Atheists in ancient Greece were identified more inclusively, and with a more diverse terminology (*atheoi*, 'those who do not cultivate the matters of the gods', 'those who eliminate the divine from reality') than in the modern west. This polytheist culture had many forms of worship of the gods – and consequently many diverse ways of disbelieving too. All the same, over time Greece developed a sophisticated set of arguments against the existence of gods, arguments that were eventually viewed as interlocking so as to constitute a coherent anti-theist position. Ancient Greek atheists were sometimes the subject of legislation and prosecution, and never achieved full social respectability; all the same, it is striking just how many atheists in both the narrow and the broad senses (i.e. including figures like Epicureans) there were in Greece.

18 Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 9.182–4; see also Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 3.43–4, and Burnyeat (1982).

19 Ps.-Plutarch *Placita* 1.7.1–10; see Runia (2010).

That atheism is more visible in Greece than in other ancient civilizations is partly a function of evidence (we simply have more stuff from Greece, and a greater range of it), and partly the result of the relatively circumscribed role of religion in Greece: priests had a relatively restricted role, and were largely cut-off from political power; there were no canonical sacred scriptures, and writing and learning were more typically deployed for what we might loosely call 'secular' purposes (drama, history, philosophy, etc.). To put it another way, the elite secured their power and prestige by displays not of fidelity to sacred strictures but of intellectual innovation, often in a way that explicitly contested received wisdom. It is notable, indeed, how often a tone of mockery can be detected in 'atheist' tracts, indicating a confident rejection of dog-eared, outmoded religious ideas.[20]

Atheism certainly was, at least at various points in ancient Greek history, a fashionable stance. Plato's last work, *The Laws*, speaks of coteries of atheists; one scholar has on this basis reconstructed the existence of an 'atheist underground' in Athens (Plato, *Laws* 888b). Atheists never, however – at least to our knowledge – gathered together into institutions or guilds (unless one counts Epicurean societies). In that sense, atheism never became a social movement in the way that it has done in the modern west. How far it extended beyond the educated elite is impossible to tell: we have very little evidence for the views of the sub-elite one way or the other, and what we do have is ambiguous. For example, Aristophanes (as noted above) depicts an atheist slave asking another if he really believes in gods (*Knights*, 30–35). It might be thought plausible that the dispossessed would have had less confidence than the privileged in a just divine order; but this may simply be a joke based on the perceived ludicrousness of the scenario. We should in any case distinguish the refined argumentation of philosophers and other thinkers in search of intellectual capital from quotidian scepticism: it is surely likely that, as in every other human society, ordinary folk differed greatly in the degree of their commitment to religious values. It should be noted, finally, that we know of no female atheists in Greek antiquity. This is hardly a major surprise, however, given how few women's voices we have from antiquity. Again, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence: certainly counter-cultural communities, among them Epicureans (and indeed Cynics), included some prominent female intellectuals, even if we cannot now access their thoughts.

It seems intuitively unlikely that atheism was the sole prerogative of elite males, but here we return to questions of definition. Privileged intellectuals were the primary demographic to be explicitly *identified as* atheists (or by an equivalent

20 E.g. Aëtius' dismissal of 'nonsense' and 'archaic, lunatic nonsense' (*Placita* 1.7.3–4).

term), and indeed the primary demographic to do the explicit identifying – but only because such badinage was itself part of the game of intellectual self-presentation.[21] Ancient definitions are not coterminous with modern ones; nor will they help answer questions that are essentially modern ones. That way lies uncontrolled anachronism (to invoke Loraux once again). If we want to know 'how widespread was atheism in ancient Greece, and what was its significance for wider Greek culture?' we need to be aware that our own terms, though alluringly similar, are crucially different in their configuration.

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21 At least until Christian times, when 'atheist' became a term used to designate all non-believers in the Christian god; see Whitmarsh (2017).

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6

The Roman Empire

NICOLE HARTMANN

In his list of synonyms for a godless man, *átheos*, Iulius Pollux enumerates as diverse characterizations someone who is impious, *asebés,* or accursed, *enagés*, someone who hates the gods, *misótheos*, or is hated by the gods, *theomisés*, someone who is impure or uninitiated, *bébelos*, or lawless, *athémitos*. For godlessness, *atheótes*, he has unholyness, *anosiótes*, or indifference towards the divine, *oligoría peri to theion.* Pollux (around AD 135–93) held the chair of rhetoric in Athens and was part of the so-called Second Sophistic, an intellectual movement in the second century AD that sought to create a kind of renaissance of the classic, especially Athenian, culture from the fifth and fourth centuries BC. In his *Onomasticon*, his only transmitted work, Pollux seeks to provide the elite of the Roman Empire with appropriate vocabulary for all spheres of life. The first book lists religious topics. Although the transmission history is not fully revealed and the existing manuscripts are quite divergent, the work in the form we can access it allows us to glimpse an ancient taxonomy of all things religious. It is highly interesting to look into these listings that start with the positive and endorsed synonyms for everything pious, which are then mirrored by their opposites, grouped in nouns, verbs, and adjectives (*Onomasticon* 1, 20–22). Yet, what do the diverse concepts named above have in common? All these words are not interchangeable and take on the meaning of godlessness only in certain contexts.

The divergent semantic meanings of these synonyms for godless and godlessness in Pollux' review of ancient Greek language point to a couple of important considerations that shall guide us through this exploration of atheism in the Roman Empire. I wrap the Roman Empire chronologically from the middle of the first century BC to the fourth century AD. Over this time it spans from east to west and north to south in varying geographical constellations. At the moment of its biggest expansion it held power over as

diverse people as the Greeks and Etruscans, but also the Egyptians and Numidians in the south, Germans and Dacians in the north, Gauls and Britons in the west, Parthians and Judaeans in the east, and many more. All these people had their specific religious traditions and presumably also an understanding of 'atheism', as well as their specific measures for how to deal with it. Our sources, however, produce a bias of only Greek and Latin male elite perspectives that exclude all other, also female, positions, or – when we are lucky – they report about them but in a mocking and polemicizing way. We have to account for competing religious norms and interventions with their own priorities and strategies. At least in Jewish and Christian sources we have access to testimonies from different religious concepts than the Greek or Roman. Moreover, written in Greek or Latin, they provide counternarratives of different appropriations of the atheist terminology that reveal its fluidity.

One basic preliminary assumption must be that 'atheism' or its synonyms are always relational terms and have to be contextualized in their specific cultural and social usage. All sorts of critique of theology or religious practice could be labelled at some point by someone as 'atheism'. Scholars have sought to embrace this dilemma by analysing the available sources in an attempt to require more certainty over which ancient man truly denied the existence of the gods. They tried to distinguish 'positive' and 'negative' atheists, the first meaning someone who actively denies the existence of gods, the latter someone who has no belief in gods. By following this approach, however, we would only reproduce the judgement of but a few ancient public intellectuals whose writings happened to survive. Instead of identifying individual 'atheists' and categorizing their 'atheism', I propose a discursive and less definitional approach by looking closely at how ancient authors present and employ what they call atheism in their time. This requires being attentive to the consensuses and implicit social expectations about religious norms and deviance. Any classification of something as deviant, superstitious, or godless is a normativizing attempt and has its specific history of negotiations, depending on the implicit social expectations (Rüpke 2016). Likewise, the degree of non-conformism is a matter of knowledge and acceptance of the norms and values, as well as their plausibility and convertibility. Of particular interest here is the concept of 'performative knowledge' that is not acquired through education or training, but by observing the countless private or public religious practices people were experiencing throughout their lives (Feeney 1998). The 'lived ancient religion' approach has pointed to the interplay of appropriation of existing practices and norms, personal engagement and knowledge, communication,

and the situational construction of religious meaning. This approach emphasizes the 'ceaseless construction' of 'religion':

> through individual action within the loose parameters provided by traditions, ideals and institutions. That is, to view religion as a precarious practice, whose referents ('gods') and communicative strategies are constantly in need of investment-labour of different kinds in order to maintain their plausibility. (Albrecht et al. 2018, 2)

The questioning of such plausibilities on varying theoretical or practical levels could be, but must not have been, seen as 'atheism'. It was common sense in philosophical circles of all couleur to criticize the beliefs, rituals, and acts of devotion of the uneducated. Yet we need to ask about their everyday 'amateur atheism', too. Their experiences were on a very material level open for doubt: the harvest that was prayed for was devastated, the myths that are told don't seem convincing, etc. People were flexible and their attachment to a certain form of cult or a certain deity was not exclusive. The notion of a 'groundstream of godlessness' seems helpful in this regard. It pays attention to accumulated experiences of doubt and their echoes throughout the times: similar ideas, images or words that are connected with doubting or even denying the possibility of divine agency (Scharfe 2006). Although it is almost impossible to find traces in our available sources, awareness to these issues must be raised.

The Impiety of Godlessness and Superstition

Browsing through the sources in the quest for godlessness reveals various and sometimes quite contrasting taxonomies. The first entry in Pollux' list of synonyms for *atheótes* is *asébeia*, impiety. But the often-encountered equation of impiety with godlessness is incorrect. Impious behaviour, *impietas* in its Latin equivalent, was not restricted to questioning the existence of gods, but could mean a lack of or wrong forms of honouring gods, ancestors, or other hierarchical superior. Plato's utopian propositions for treating 'wrong' assumptions about the gods in book 10 of his *Laws* are on the level of punishable acts of *asébeia* and not of theoretical reflections (Cançik-Lindemaier 2006). Plato distinguishes three forms of *asébeia* towards the gods: when the existence of gods is denied; when it is proposed that gods exist but are indifferent to the affairs of mortals; or when they are conceptualized as being open to bribery by sacrifices and prayers (*Laws* 885b). This last crime of *asébeia* is directed especially at religious specialists and entrepreneurs

who walked about from town to town and offered special divinatory, healing, or cursing practices, often denounced as magic. The official cult practices of processions, feasts, and sacrifices are not intended. Yet religious acts that take place in private spaces, even secretly, on an individual level that are considered as non-conforming to sanctioned forms of cult are labelled as superstition. The Latin root is *superstitio* and the Greek term *deisidaimonía*, literally meaning dread of deities. The tension between conceptions of superstition and 'atheism' is present in writings from the Roman Empire.[1]

Plutarch (*c.* AD 46–120), a Greek author of biographies of the Roman emperors and other famous men, also wrote a number of reflections on moral and religious questions. He studied at the Academy at Athens and is an important source for Platonist philosophy of his time. Later in his life he was a priest at the Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, the famous oracle, and achieved Roman citizenship. He is an important testimony for a bicultural Greco-Roman biography. In his work *On Superstition*, *peri deisidaimonías*, he contrasts superstition, *deisidaimonía*, and godlessness, *atheótes*, as two extremes of impiety, *asébeia*, in whose middle one finds the right piety, *eusébeia*.

Right at the beginning, Plutarch marks his disdain for Epicurus and declares the atomist theory to be false, but not harmful for the individual, whereas complete wrong assumptions about the divine poison all aspects of life. For Plutarch, both paths are misleading and caused by false judgement, but superstition is worse and even dangerous because emotions are involved. He develops on all possible misconceptions about the gods and how the superstitious turn the tables, thinking that the gods are not kind but evil: 'they fear the gods and flee to the gods for help; they flatter them and assail them with abuse, pray to them and blame them' (*Superstition* 6e). The superstitious fear the gods too much, always expecting their wrath for any wrongdoing and constantly thinking about what could possibly go wrong. The Platonic notion of bribery of the gods seems to echo in this writing of a young Platonist who describes the gods as bearers of good will and the superstitious as partaking in irrational rituals and acting against all reason. They attribute all sorts of calamities happening to them as punishments from a divine force – because they feel being hateful to the gods, *theomisés*. Above we have seen that Pollux lists this term as a synonym for an atheist. He distinguishes the superstitious, *deisidaímon* as someone who exaggeratedly fears the gods, *hypertimón*, from an atheist. Plutarch, in his text, speaks of atheism as

1 In the following I speak of atheist and atheism, where the Greek terms átheos and atheótes are used in the sources.

indifference or insensibility towards the divine, *anaisthesía* and *apatheía* in Greek terms, betraying a strong sympathy for the Stoic ethics of mastering the emotions (*Superstition* 6d).[2]

In his study on *superstitio* in the Roman Empire, Richard Gordon draws on the 'operational aspect of its situational, argumentative or vituperative use, and the problems arising: the nature of the anxieties expressed, the boundaries policed, the relation between superstition and other negative words' (Gordon 2008, 73). One needs to be attentive to these dimensions in the field of ancient atheism, too. Plutarch betrays a slight sympathy for the 'utter indifference', *apatheía* of the atheists (2) and prefers it to the folly and blindness of the superstitious. For him, the two options are permeable only in one direction: atheism could not lead to superstition but superstition at the stage of feeling completely oppressed by overwhelming fear of gods could lead to hating them and eventually abandoning them: 'The atheist thinks there are no gods; the superstitious man wishes there were none, but believes in them against his will; for he is afraid not to believe' (11f). Plutarch ends his reflection with a brief statement that both attitudes are too ignorant and simply miss the point of good and right piety. In this work, he does not draw the full picture of this ideal piety, he only provides counterexamples. One of them is the Jewish pause at Shabbat to which he refers twice as superstitious (3d, 8c) and blames the defeat of the Judaeans in the Jewish war on their inactivity during Shabbat, leaving them vulnerable. This is in line with the antagonistic function of the employment of the discourses of superstition and atheism to denounce foreign cults as 'wrong religion'.

The boundary marking of the sociopolitical elite in the Roman Empire can be illustrated with a look into works of Latin Roman historians. From Tacitus (AD 58–102) we have a number of texts that describe the military and political campaigns of Roman leaders and emperors and their conquest of new regions and people. In his judgement he follows a general tendency to label foreign religious practices as superstition.[3] In his *Histories* he describes events of the Jewish war and refers to Jewish religion as 'obstinate superstition' (2.1.23). A similar normative judgement we find in his *Annals*. Here, Tacitus retells the history of the roughly first hundred years of the Roman Empire and reports the execution of followers of Christ in Rome that was ordered by Emperor

2 Gordon (2008, 87) proposes to translate 'imperviousness to the divine' for *apatheía pros to theíon*.

3 For example, the cults of the Egyptians (*Histories* 1.11.1); Germans (*Germania* 39.4, 45.3); Gauls (*Agricola* 11.3). See Gordon (2008, 74–5) on frontiers between traditional/sanctioned/proper vs non-traditional/unsanctioned/improper religious actions.

Nero. He dismisses their worldview as 'deadly superstition' that promotes 'hatred of the human race' (15.44.2). Suetonius (*c.* AD 70 to after 120), who is known for his biographies of the first twelve Roman emperors, affirms this line of thought when he reports the same events under Nero and speaks of the attitude of the Christ-followers as a 'new and evil superstition' (*Nero* 16.2). Pliny the Younger (AD 61–113), in his attempt to find the best practice in judging Christ-followers, describes it as 'corrupt and immoderate superstition' (*Letter* 10.96.8). The Greek-speaking Jewish historian Flavius Josephus reports that Jews had been vituperated as misanthropists and atheists (*Against Apion* 2.148).[4] To this end the usage of the two notions *superstitio* or *deisidaimonía* and *atheótes* is marked by their opposition to what was constructed as piety towards ancestral religion that needs to be guarded. The implied attitudes, however, differ widely. One substantial difference is, for example, the misogynist notions that were often promoted within the discourse of superstition. Yet there is no recorded evidence of a misogynist connotation in atheism.

Epicureans and Godlessness

Our first Latin source for reflections on the possibility of neglecting the divine and the forms it can take is Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 to 43 BC). He is also the first testimony for the Latin word *atheus*. This loanword may have been used in Latin philosophical circles to talk about the usual atheist suspects: the Greek philosophers and theorists that Tim Whitmarsh presents in this volume. There was no Latin equivalent for *atheus* in the full meaning of someone being godless. Cicero is an invaluable source for otherwise lost philosophical treatises by various thinkers, and basically reproduces traditional patterns of neglecting what was considered as godlessness. He, in fact, is not very original in his reflection about the meaning of *atheus* in his own contemporary setting. In his trialogue *On the Nature of the Gods*, *De natura deorum*, from around 45 BC Cicero presents a discussion of three adherents from different schools of thought: the Epicurean, the Stoic, and the Academic Sceptic. There is a clear tendency against Epicurean philosophy, with its separation of the human and divine spheres between which no interaction is possible and thus all religious communication does not reach beyond the human space. The Sceptic protagonist denounces this attitude as

4 For a comprehensive overview, see Granger Cook (2010); for the notion of misanthropy, see pp. 63–5.

being inconsequential, because the Epicurean abolishing of divine beneficence and benevolence is effectively atheism: a disguised belief that gods don't exist (1117–19, 1123). He introduces himself as 'I am Cotta and a *pontifex*' and is seen as representing Cicero's own position in the ambiguous situation of intellectual reflection on religion and acting as a priest. Cotta defends his upholding of the beliefs and cult forms of his ancestors, which he frames in terms of 'religio' of the Romans (3, 5–6). Cotta presents it as wise to be indeterminate in unsolved questions like the nature of the divine, a motif that runs throughout the work and leaves it to the reader or hearer to take sides. Cicero follows here the principle of *epoché* – suspension of judgement – that was introduced by the Hellenistic philosopher Carneades (214/13 to 129/28 BC) and later prominently promoted by Sextus Empiricus (AD 160–210). This undecided Scepticism expresses critique of aspects of cult and religion, and systematically doubts the truth of any dogma, but does not outright deny the existence of gods. It is an attitude that one might today call agnostic.

One prominent Latin agent of Epicurean thought is Titus Lucretius Carus (*c.* AD 97–55). His only surviving work is a unique philosophical treatise in the form of a poem: *De rerum natura – On the Nature of Things*. For him, Epicurus' materialist view of the world was of such high relevance that he invested much effort in translating it for his contemporaries, meticulously trying to avoid Latin neologisms of Greek transliterations. Therefore, he does not employ the term *atheus*. He virtuously elaborates his understanding of the Epicurean teaching and sets off with a drastic critique of religion. He introduces Epicurus, without saying his name, as the one who has taught humanity to overcome its fears caused by religion, *religio* (1.62–79).

In the first hundred verses the stance against religion is set in a harsh tone, fuelled by his recalling of the myth of the sacrifice of Iphigenia that preceded the Trojan War and was thought to guarantee the victorious journey of the Greeks (1.85–101). With this extreme example of violence in a cultic act to appease a divinity, Lucretius begins his discourse on the impiety of religion, in whose name people are threatened into such deeds. Lack of knowledge about the nature of things lets humans fear the gods. Lucretius declares that nature is free and spontaneous and the gods 'pass untroubled days and a life serene' therein, with no influence on humans (2.1093–94). In his fifth book he marks the historicity of the attribution of natural phenomena such as storms and thunder to the will of gods and declares human acts of devotion such as sacrifices and vows as impious (5.1183–1203). He presents a counternarrative of piety that is detached from the conventional myths, beliefs, and acts that address the gods. In good and somewhat paradoxical Epicurean tradition,

Lucretius provides conceptions of the form, the qualities, and the place of the gods, but he denies the possibility and efficiency of any human action that reaches out to those who dwell in *intermundia*, worlds in between, that are completely disconnected from the world of human experience. For Lucretius, the true piety lies in tranquil observation of the nature of things and understanding that there is no providence and no afterlife: 'he wanted his verse to capture the magic of the world around us and to teach us that we should seek "divinity" in matter, not in some imaginary god' (Whitmarsh 2015, 184).

Lucretius does not provide an apology of Epicurean non-atheism nor does he discuss the matter at all, unlike a number of other Epicurean advocates. A Greek-speaking contemporary of Lucretius was Philodemus of Gadara (*c.* 110 to 40–35 BC). The transmission of some of his writings is one of the more spectacular stories about how we got access to the work of an ancient author: they were found in a library that was covered in the ashes of Vesuvius in Herculaneum. A great part of the texts from the *Villa dei Papiri* can be attributed to Epicurean thinkers. One fragile papyrus that was unrolled and did not completely fall into scraps revealed Philodemus' treatise *On Piety*, *de pietate*, in which he criticizes previous philosophers and poets for their views of the gods and cites Epicurus' reproach against Prodicus, Diagoras, and Critias, who would 'eliminate the divine from reality' (Philodemus 1996, 142–3). But, elimination of the gods from the reality of humans was an allegation Epicureans faced themselves time and again. Therefore, Philodemus sets out his *On Piety* as a defensive enterprise: he systematically demonstrates how Epicurus argues for the existence of gods, their blessedness, imperishability, and remoteness from human affairs, and he repudiates the false conceptions that theologians and poets promoted about them. Another piece saved in pieces at Herculaneum – *On the Gods, De dis* – is dedicated to an elaboration of Epicurus' teaching on the places of the gods. It seems quite a paradox that Epicurus and a number of his followers placed their conceptions of the divine quite prominently in their work, yet could not convince everybody that their preclusion of human–divine interference was no crypto-atheism. Cicero valued Philodemus' poetry and probably owes him some material for the Epicurean parts of his *On the Nature of the Gods*, but he clearly dismissed this worldview and lets his protagonist Cotta repeat an earlier statement from the Stoic philosopher Poseidonios: that Epicurus in fact does not really believe that there are gods (1.123).

In all epochs of Greco-Roman antiquity, the 'stain' of atheism in the full meaning of denial of the existence of gods stuck with Epicurean philosophy,

and its adherents felt the need to produce apologies against this accusation. Of one such defensive enterprise we know by chance from the second century AD. In the small town of Oenoanda in modern-day southern Turkey an Epicurean enthusiast paid for a large inscription that was placed in the central square to promote Epicurus' teaching. A number of fragments were found, and one Diogenes could be identified as the initiator. In one column the charge of atheism is addressed, vehemently denied, and – again – contrasted with the sayings of 'true' atheists such as Diagoras and Protagoras. Epicurean thinkers went on to defend themselves against allegations of atheism by presenting and classifying forms of atheist teachings to demonstrate why theirs was not. Yet representatives of all ancient worldviews had this one thing in common: denouncing the atheism of Epicurean philosophy. One echo of the strong connotation of Epicureanism with atheism in late antiquity is the term *apikorsim*, by which an Aramaic root-word (PKR) for disrespect merges with the name of the Greek philosopher to label sceptics and 'apostates' in rabbinic sources.

A Satirist's View: Lucian

Another ancient writer who kept scholars of all ages busy speculating about whether he was an atheist or not is the satirist Lucian of Samosata (*c.* AD 120–80). Few biographical details other than his supposedly Syrian provenance and Greek education as a rhetor are known, but from the mass of his transmitted oeuvre that includes dialogues, treatises, biographies, parodies, novels, and more it can be said with certainty that he had a strong enlightening impetus to denigrate the ancient myths – be they Greek, Syrian, Roman, philosophical, or Christian. The author *persona* of some of his texts should not be taken too seriously as representing his own attitudes, but a general sceptic position towards religious belief and practice can certainly be deduced. He presents a kaleidoscope of traditional and radical critiques of sacrifices, of stories about the gods, of conventional or 'foreign' religion. His works are reflections on all sorts of discourses, positions, and religious tendencies that were to be found among his contemporaries. Lucian spoke to an interested and affirming audience that appreciated this kind of entertainment.

One of Lucian's biographies is about the contemporary philosopher Demonax. He presents a less mocking, rather admiring account of anecdotes of a witty man whose retorts undermine the religious position of his interlocutors. He reports that Demonax had refrained from religious practice and replied, when asked about it, in a seriocomic style. Somewhat humorous and

educating – 'kind, gentle and cheerful' in Lucian's words (*Demonax*, 10) – he points to paradoxes in people's religious communication. In one episode he was accused of never sacrificing, and he answered: 'Do not be surprised, men of Athens, that I have not hitherto sacrificed to her [Athena]: I did not suppose that she had any need of my offerings' (*Demonax*, 11). In his *On Sacrifices*, Lucian elaborates at length on this topic with the tendency to completely neglect sacrificial practices. Demonax, however, is portrayed not as someone theorizing about the (non-)existence of the divine, but as actively not practising religion.

In another biography, Lucian portrays the protagonist as a trickster who takes advantage of the confidence and anxieties of people. In *Alexander or the False Prophet* he presents Alexander of Abonouteichos as the founder of the cult of Glycon, a mammal-headed snake god that is otherwise attested by statues, coins, and inscriptions, but no other literary source. Lucian asserts mockingly that Alexander chose the credulous and uneducated people of remote Paphlagonia, a region in what is now northern Turkey, as the audience for his experimental implementation of a new cult. Only those people would fall prey to his bricolage of symbols, methods, and practices, including oracle, healing, and – then trending – mystery cults. The narrator *persona* of the story is witness to a couple of situations and deconstructs their trickery, which was obvious to him. He reports that Alexander excluded from participation in his mystic rituals those whom he thought would reveal the swindle, proclaiming: 'If any atheist or Christian or Epicurean has come to spy upon the rites, let him be off.' And, likely as part of the ritual setting, they were expulsed from the event when Alexander shouted 'Out with the Christians!' and the crowd replied 'Out with the Epicureans!' (*Alexander*, 38). Twice more the two groups are labelled as atheists (25) and impious (46). It is remarkable here that Christians and Epicureans were paralleled as atheists in Lucian's account of Alexander's supposed understanding – for not recognizing the divinity of Glycon and being a potential threat to the success of the cultic enterprise. In Lucian's attempt to demonstrate the fraud of this religious invention he singles out two groups who would not fall prey to it and contrasts their reasonable criticism with the idiocy of the adherents of Alexander's cult. Their 'atheism' is pictured as godlessness in regard to the god Glycon and was meant to mark the boundaries of the in- and outgroups – no further quality of their godlessness is suggested. Once more we encounter the Epicureans as prototypes of atheists, in the very unique constellation of being in company with Christians.

A Jewish Counternarrative of Atheism: Philo of Alexandria

Another bicultural, or rather tricultural, intellectual from the Roman Empire is Philo of Alexandria (*c.* 15 BC to *c.* AD 40). He grew up in the Greco-Jewish diaspora in one of the most important metropolises of the ancient world, with a vibrant and multifaceted cultural and intellectual atmosphere. He was trained in reading and interpreting the Jewish scriptures, in the specific Alexandrian genre of commentary, as well as in Platonic philosophy. He later went to Rome as ambassador and became familiar with Stoic philosophy. His intellectual development was shaped by the changing audiences he addressed: from fellow Jews in Alexandria to enlightened intellectuals in Rome (Niehoff 2018). We are extraordinarily lucky that we can follow closely such an intellectual career, enabled by quite a number of transmitted works that range from biblical exegesis and allegorical commentary to historiography and philosophical reflections. In this context of a unique mixture of Jewish and Greco-Roman religious and philosophical thought we can follow Philo's appropriation and transformation of discourses of atheism and distinguish tradition from innovation. He instrumentalizes the term *atheótes* in various contexts and adjusts its philosophical, anthropological, political, or exegetical dimensions according to genre and reading audience (Reynard 1999). On the one hand, he meets with other Greco-Roman authors in mocking and neglecting the zoomorphic deities of Egyptian religion, which he denounces as impious atheism (e.g. *Moses* 2.163). He also adopts Greek philosophical topoi like the Platonic critique of the classical myths about the gods and repeats the allegations of atheism against Protagoras or Theodoros, though for the latter with a certain sympathizing twist because he had denied the gods of the Athenians (Philo, *Every Good Man Is Free*, 127–30).

On the other hand, he adds his Jewish perspective of the god-creator and his providence. In his work *On the Eternity of the World*, he discusses the major philosophical discourses in light of the belief in God's creation and attributes to the Epicureans, the Atomists as well as the Stoics, a terrible atheism because they negate providence (10). In his specific Jewish appropriation, Philo portrays those whom he attests a lack of knowledge of the one God as atheists. He connects the Jewish rejection of idolatry and polytheistic religion with the connotation of atheism (e.g. *On Drunkenness* 109–10). Moreover, he describes Jews that are attracted by polytheist myths as tending to atheism (e.g. *On Rewards and Punishments* 162). A cumulation of idolatry and atheism is for him the divination of humans – in the case of the Egyptian pharaohs and

especially in the case of the divination of Emperor Gaius Caligula (AD 12–41). In his *On the Embassy to Gaius* he describes it as the superlative of atheism, the atheism of human hubris (77). An extraordinary and original combination of Philo's two thought worlds is his allegoric interpretation of the biblical story of Cain, a story that bursts with impiety. He postulates that the sophist Protagoras is an offspring of Cain's madness of believing that man is the measure of all things (*On the Posterity and Exile of Cain* 35). In this conceptual innovation he uses atheism especially to define moral categories. Throughout his lifetime and oeuvre, Philo utilizes the term *atheótes* in various contexts as a pejorative signifier for behaviour that counters his interpretation and understanding of biblical literature and Jewish tradition.

The Atheism of Christians

As Philo's testimony cannot be taken to represent *the* ancient Jewish attitude to atheism, likewise texts from single proto-orthodox voices that are transmitted do not allow us to get a full picture of ancient Christian attitudes. However, they illuminate the tension that the atheist topic derives from the Christian adherence to only one god and the outright denial of the existence of any other deity. The Christian cult was organized without the well-known features of any other religion, it was not iconographic, had no altars, temples, or other consecrated places where the central practice of sacrifice could be performed. The degree of suspicion this raised is attested by a number of pagan sources, as well as from Christian apologetic and martyr literature. In texts of the so-called apologists from the second century, a couple of Christian men who defend the new religion and explain why it is immoral to prosecute and execute confessors, some new connotations are introduced to the atheist terminology. Little is known about the biographies of these Christian thinkers; we can only deduce from their writings a certain higher education and more or less basic Greco-Roman philosophical knowledge.

Athenagoras, probably living in Athens, addresses his apologetic *Embassy for the Christians* to the co-ruling emperors Marc Aurel and Commodus (between AD 176 and 180). He appeals to them as fellow philosophers who would critically assess false accusations and distinguishes them from 'they', the accusers. He introduces atheism as the principal charge against Christ-believers and refutes it immediately by contrasting Diagoras' blunt declaration that there is no god with the Christian credo of the one eternal god-creator (4). He develops on his understanding of theoretical atheism by referring to reflections of different ancient thinkers and philosophers on

the misconception of popular gods and their tendency to speak of one god who is the maker of the universe. In his argumentation he wants to demonstrate that they were all not regarded as atheists, so Christians should not be accused of being atheists, too (5–12). Athenagoras then turns his discussion to practical atheism, namely the Christian abstention from sacrifice and cult (13–30). He asserts that piety cannot be measured in terms of sacrifices because the one god has no need of them (13) and simplifies the accusation that Christians do not accept the gods of the cities by claiming that in this logic all cities and all people would think of each other as atheists because they don't venerate the same gods (14) – a pun not solely hypothetical. He then elaborates at length on the distinction between the worship of idols of the gods of myth – idolatry in his terms – and of the immaterial and uncreated god. In effect, Athenagoras refutes the accusation of theoretical atheism by expounding his theology and affirms practical atheism because Christians and their god don't communicate through sacrifices.

Of Justin, a Christian teacher in Rome, we have two apologetic texts which were addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius and his sons (*c.* 155–6). Justin introduces his rejection of the charge of atheism by recalling ancient philosophers who were accused of the same and, like Socrates, were even killed. He sets the grounds to frame the new religion as philosophy (1. Apology 5, 3). Justin accepts being called an atheist when this refers to the 'supposed gods', which he continues to term 'wicked demons' that deceive men, but not to 'the god who is most true' (6, 1). He explains why Christians deny sacrifices and idolatry, the nature of their god who created everything, and what his providence means – only to ask 'what sensible man will not grant that we are not atheists?' (13, 1).

So, Athenagoras and Justin infer that it is possible for Christians to name the pagan gods vain idols and evil demons and not participate in any traditional form of cult, and still not be atheists because they venerate their one god whom they worship without material devices. They try to provide a peaceful and rational picture of Christian philosophy, but they miss – more consciously than not – the practical dimension for Roman officials when confronted with Christ-believers who would not consent to an act of sacrifice to demonstrate their loyalty to the state and acknowledgement of traditional values. This practical dimension, however, seems to be one of the most important of these confrontations: the non-understanding of the Roman officials about why for Christian confessors it was such an existential question to not perform sacrifice.

In various martyr texts we learn of Roman judges who were willing to release the accused. But, since the point of these texts is that the accused cling to their confession, the judges eventually have to send them to execution. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is a narrative about the execution of the bishop of Smyrna and twelve companions in the middle of the second century. The drama unfolds in a series of dialogues that demonstrate the different evaluations of the consequences of religious practice. 'Away with the atheists' cries the crowd in the stadium, since the confessors deny sacrifice (MPoly 3,2). The proconsul proposes Polycarp, who is identified as a teacher of *asébeia*, impiety (12,2), to renounce his faith and direct the declaration 'Away with the atheists' to his fellow Christians. But Polycarp 'observed the whole crowd of lawless pagans . . . and, gesturing at them with his hand, . . .' said: 'Away with the atheists' (9). Thus, the redefinition of atheism was clearly marked for the reading and hearing audiences of the narrative.

The Greek Christian minds that speak of atheism are mirrored by a few pagan Latin sources that speak of obstinacy, hatred of mankind, or superstition, as we have seen above. In the *Acts of Cyprian*, the bishop of Carthage who was executed in AD 257 is accused of having a sacrilegious mind, gathering a criminal conspiracy and setting himself up 'as an enemy of the Roman gods and our sacred rites' (3, 4–5). It was his impiety of not obeying the demand to show his loyalty to the Roman order by an act of sacrifice that called for his execution. One generation earlier in Carthage, the ingenious Christian author Tertullian (*c.* AD 150–220) coined the term *irreligiositas* in his defence against the accusation of sacrilege and treason, *sacrilegia et maiestas* (e.g. *Apology* 13, 1; 25, 14). He outright claims that Christians don't recognize the gods (10, 2) and employs various traditional arguments like Euhemerism, critiques of sacrifices and of divination of emperors to demonstrate why pagans themselves are impious and sacrilegious, in sum: irreligious (13, 1). He and other Latin authors did not adapt the Latinized *atheus* to admit their own neglect of the pagan gods or to frame the beliefs of their opponents. Yet by presenting narratives of returned accusations of *atheótes* or *irreligiositas*, Christian authors more and more reframe the concept of atheism with the connotation of a wrong conception of the divine.

Clement of Alexandria (*c.* AD 150–215) participated, like Philo, in a lively and stimulating intellectual atmosphere and was able to integrate Greek classical literature and philosophy with biblical traditions in his Christian perspective. His transmitted texts have an apologetic purpose, too, and employ a wide range of philosophic, especially Platonic, discourses to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian conception of the divine. He categorizes degrees of

knowledge and asserts that the true gnostic finds the knowledge about the nature of god in Christ's teaching (*Miscellanies* 6–7). For Clement, those who deny god's providence are truly atheists (*Miscellanies* 6, 15, 122). He defines unambiguously the new parameters of atheism from the Christian point of view: one who is persuaded that god is omnipotent and has learned the mysteries from god's son cannot be an atheist, because an atheist thinks that the one god does not exist. But one who dreads the pagan gods (*daimones*) and deifies all things, wood and stone, is superstitious (*Miscellanies* 7, 1, 4). Clement develops also on the semantic connection of the term *átheos* with unbeliever, *ápistos* (*Miscellanies* 5, 1, 6), a connotation that grows dominant in the Christian career of the word the more the situation of the Christians stabilized in the Roman Empire and the more the inter-Christian battles about the right doctrine were unleashed.

Greek Christian authors appropriated and redefined the terminology in two ways in particular. The first new meaning denounces every non-monotheist religious concept as godless. Origen (*c.* AD 184–253), probably a student of Clement and one of the most brilliant early Christian writers, frames the term in this direction and speaks of atheistic polytheism (*Against Celsus* 1, 1; 3, 73) or polytheistic atheism (*Exhortation to Martyrdom* 5; 32). Only a few sources are transmitted that testify to the pagan perspective in this dispute about who are the godless people. One of these sources brings in, for once, a non-intellectual perspective as a reaction to issues of people's lives. It also provides evidence that the term had entered the public discourse to label religious opponents. We are lucky to have an inscription from the year 312 that preserves a petition from the people of Lycaonia and Pamphylia to the Emperors Maximinus Daia, Constantine, and Licinius. They express their concern for the cult of the gods that should not be 'trespassed by any new form of wickedness' by which they mean the 'ancient insanity of the Christians who have until now maintained this disease'. It is a concern about public order and the welfare of the state that is perceived to be guaranteed by the kin gods of the emperors. They ask for sanctions that forbid the 'illicitness of the hateful devotion of the atheists'. This text is from a period of intensified persecution of Christians, when they were targeted by edicts that demanded their compliance with traditional religion and ordered to demonstrate it by an act of sacrifice. It is shortly before Emperor Constantine consolidated his power and paved the way for the Christianization of the Roman Empire.

Only a couple of decades later, Emperor Constantius (AD 317–361) harshly rejects traditional religious practice: 'Superstition shall cease, the madness of sacrifices shall be abolished' and orders punishment for those who still

perform them (*Codex Theododianus* 16.10.2). Two Christian authors accompany this period of transition and allow us in their writings to follow the turning of the tables on who has to defend against the accusation of atheism. From both, the historian Eusebius of Caesarea (AD 260/4 to 339/40) and the leader of the Alexandrian church Athanasius (*c.* AD 296/8 to 373), the earlier writings have an apologetic character and attempt to prove the superiority of the Christian conception of the divine. Eusebius, at the beginning of his *Preparation for the Gospel*, refers to the Greek perspective and asks how those who have turned away from the ancient gods and think that sacrifices, initiations, and mysteries are impious and atheistic could not be seen as impious and atheistic (1, 2). He refutes the accusations by explaining his Christian doctrine and sets out to prove the impiety of the pagan religious practices. Athanasius undertakes a similar project with his *Against the Heathen* and *The Incarnation of the Word of God* and frames especially the pagan myths and cultic practices as atheism and impiety, often paired. In their later works, however, both authors employ the same terminology for their opposing Christian parties and set the second new standard for the use of *atheótes* to denounce 'wrong' Christian beliefs. From the second half of the fourth century onwards, Christian authors felt no need to ostracize pagan religion but shift their pejorative accusations of atheism against 'heresies'. How dominant the new Christian connotations grew can be grasped by a look at the Patristic Greek Lexicon by Geoffrey W. H. Lampe (1969), where a completely new taxonomy of *atheos* in the Christian context unfolds. It was used to mean (1) separate from God or without God; (2) ungodly or immoral; (3) disbelieving in the existence of a divine being; and (4) without the true God or not believing in the true God.

Conclusion

Our sources reveal that atheism actually wasn't a major topic in the early Roman Empire. There are very few attestations of the terminology and cognate concepts. As long as atheism was only the object of philosophical reflection and dispute about the possibility of the non-existence of gods, it was not seen as a threat. The reflections of Roman imperial thinkers are basically echoes of earlier catalogues of atheists and refer to the same stereotyped 'true' atheists like Diagoras or Theodoros of Cyrene. No contemporary names were added. Yet, in another echo chamber of intellectual disourses, the game of Epicurean atheism, of its insinuation by opponents and defences against by adherents, was played throughout the centuries. Yet

there is no reported case of an Epicurean who was brought to court for his neglect of the popular conceptions of the gods.

The terminology of atheism had a renaissance from the second century AD onwards, when the notion of 'proper' religion grew more important and processes of standardization of 'traditional' religious norms and values began. The historian Dio Cassius (*c.* 163–229 CE) refers to atheism in two pieces from his *Roman History*. He narrates how the later emperor Augustus was counselled by his mentor Maecenas to not 'permit anybody to be an atheist or sorcerer'. This counsel is directed against foreign practices that Maecenas does not see as being in accordance with the traditions of the fathers. They might distort Roman religion and end up in 'conspiracies, factions, and cabals' and eventually even 'revolution' (52.36.1–4). The other instance he reports is from the reign of emperor Domitian (AD 51–96), who brought against his cousin and consul Flavius Clemens and his wife the charge of atheism: 'a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned' (67.14.1–2). So Dio Cassius reports that this apostasy from pagan to Jewish religion was treated as a threat that justified severe measures.

These two episodes illustrate how atheism – with the connotation of lawlessness, one of Pollux' synonyms – could be perceived as opposing traditional values on a practical level and be classified as dangerous for political and social cohesion. The Roman Empire embraced a plurality of ethnic polytheisms and a multitude of viewpoints and practices, not to mention the rise of the so-called mystery cults that allowed ever more self-chosen religious distinction. It had to cultivate these differences and guard social order (Ando 2012). The discrepancy of theorized and practised atheism becomes evident in the escalated confrontation with Christians who were accused of sacrilege and treason. Christian authors develop on this in terms of *irreligiositas* or *atheótes* in an ambiguous manner: affirming that Christians don't acknowledge traditional forms of venerating the gods on the one hand, and demonstrating that their piety is directed to the one god alone on the other – they are not godless but god-exclusive. In Jewish and Christian appropriations especially, the terminology gains the polemic connotation of false beliefs or wrong assumptions about the divine. Our sources reveal that the discursive field of godlessness was in constant flux and the terms *átheos* and *atheótes* were empty signifiers used to designate diverse concepts intending different substantial qualities of critical attitudes. They also reveal the absence of godlessness in the absolute meaning of someone being strictly without any conception of divine superhuman agents. It is like a blind spot. And for the ancient thinkers whose reflections we can access, it seems to not have been a real option.

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7

India: 1500 BC to AD 1200

RAMKRISHNA BHATTACHARYA

Diversity and Unity of India

India, particularly to westerners, is still a land of fakirs lying on thorn beds, of yogis sitting cross-legged and practising austerity, of mendicants with matted locks clad in saffron, of awe-inspiring idols, of hundreds of gods and goddesses, and of elephants, tigers, snakes and snake-charmers, and everything exotic. Above all, she is known to be the home of all sorts of obscure religious cults, mysticism, and diverse rituals. In short, she is 'the other' of whatever western civilization stands for.

Nothing could be further from the truth. India indeed is the home of diverse religions, not all of which are theistic. However strange it may seem, the fact is that, beside the Veda-based religious communities (what are generally labelled indiscriminately as 'Hindu'), two major non-Vedic 'religions', Jainism and Buddhism, were atheistic, anti-Vedic yet not materialistic. The concept of the unity of India needs to be qualified by the other concept, that of diversity. Diversity is as all-pervasive as unity. It is apparent in all respects – the nature of the land, weather, language, diet, clothing, and more. Besides the three religions mentioned above, Muslims came to settle in both north and south India mostly from the twelfth century AD. Christians of various denominations, including Syrian Christians, had been living in India even before them. The fire-worshipping Parsees (Zoroastrians) had been a part of western Indian culture right from the early centuries of the common era, when a batch migrated from Persia. Around the fourth or fifth century AD, at the time of Kalidasa, the eminent poet-dramatist in Sanskrit, there were bald, bearded Persians in India (see his epic *The Dynasty of Raghu* [*Raghuvaṃśa*], 4.60–64). They were slowly assimilated in the caste system as Maga or Śākadvīpī Brāhmaṇas.

These are only a few examples of the diversity that marks India and her culture and civilization. In addition to the various religions and their

followers, there has always been, and still are, thin streams of atheism, materialism, and infideism flowing side by side with the mainstream, and a small but determined batch of atheists. As Richard Garbe once observed, '[T]here is no doubt that these doctrines had even afterwards, as they have today, numerous secret followers' (1897, 25).

In order to trace their origin and development, we have to start from the times of the Vedic people, who most probably came from outside via Persia (Iran) in or about 1500 BC. There were several centres of urban civilization in western India (generally referred to as 'The Indus Valley Civilization') long before their arrival. However, in the absence of any written record, we are unable to say anything definite about their religious practices. But urbanization frowns upon 'sceptics and sectaries' (as V. Gordon Childe observed). So, nothing much could be found about their existence in pre-Vedic India, even if the script could be deciphered.

We therefore propose to begin with the Vedic culture as embodied in the four compilations of verses and prose passages, mainly the *Ṛgveda*, the *Sāmaveda*, the *Yajurveda*, and the *Atharvaveda*.

Scepticism and Agnosticism in the Vedas

The Vedas, particularly the Saṃhitās, are widely revered and accepted as self-revealed works (as claimed by the philosophical school called Mīmāṃsā) or composed by God Himself (according to the exponents of the Nyāya system). Yet, from very early times, we hear strong dissenting voices, doubting, if not challenging, the concept of a creator of the world and the authority of the Vedic texts as infallible. Here is one such example from *Ṛgveda*, hymn 10.129.6–7:

> But, after all, who knows, and who can say
> whence it all came, and how creation happened?
> The gods themselves are later than creation,
> so who knows truly whence it has arisen?
> Whence all creation had its origin,
> he, whether he fashioned it or whether he did not,
> he, who surveys it all from highest heaven
> he knows—or maybe even does not know.
>
> (Trans. Basham, 1954, 247–8)[1]

[1] Cf. two other *Ṛgveda* hymns, 1.164 and 10.190. For a thorough study, see S. Bhattacharji (1984, 42–9). See also Sarup (1984, 71–80) for Kautsa's criticism of the Veda on several grounds.

This doubt is also expressed in *Katha Upaniṣad*, 1.1.20, not concerning the origin of the world or the gods, but in relation to the Other World alone. Naciketas, a young boy, meets Yama, the lord of the dead, in the god's own domain. He is granted three boons by Yama. Naciketas asks for his final boon:

> THIS constant doubt about a man departed—
> Some say he is, and others say he is not—
> This do I wish to know of thee as teacher:
> Of all thy promised boons this is the third one.

Yama strongly remonstrates:

> The Gods themselves, of yore herein had doubtings:
> Not easy 'tis to know, subtle this matter:
> Another boon demand, O Niciketas,
> O do not press me, of this boon acquit me.

Naciketas is not to be persuaded. He insists on having the last boon:

> The Gods themselves, they say, herein had doubtings:
> And thou, O Death, dost say, ''Tis hard to know it':
> And no one but one thee may be found to tell it:
> No other boon at all can equal this one. (Trans. Datta 1983, 21–2)

Yet there is no evidence that scepticism or infideism contributed to the birth of materialism. So far as the literary sources are concerned, they are either theological (as the Vedic literature) or quasi-historical secular works, known as *itihāsa-purāṇa,* like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. In some of the Upaniṣads we find a strong idealist bent, dealing with the philosophical issues concerning the self, and a definite assertion of life after death, of heaven and hell, and of rebirth. Materialism is said to be associated with the demons (*asura*s, lit. non-gods). In any case, the Upaniṣadic philosophy of *ātman* and *brahman* replace both the Vedic sacrificial cult and the primitive materialism expounded by Uddālaka Āruṇi (see below). Materialism as a full-fledged philosophical doctrine does not appear before the common era. Even then, the doctrinal aspect seems to be of less importance than its anti-theological and anti-fideist nature.

'Competing Causalities'

Before the systematization of the orthodox (*āstika*) and heterodox (*nāstika*) schools, the 'pre-history' of Indian philosophy seems to have been concerned with one focal problem: what or who is the first cause (in Sanskrit, *jagat-*

kāraṇa, the cause of the world)? Several alternatives, more than twenty-four, appear to have been proposed long before and after the philosophical ferment that rocked north India in the sixth and fifth centuries BC (Bhattacharya 2001, 19–23). *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 1.2 speaks (in Halbfass' words) of six 'competing causalities' (Halbfass 1992, 291), each claimed by its proponents to be so. They are *kāla* (time), *svabhāva* (lit. own being, meaning inherent nature), *niyati* (destiny), *yadṛcchā* (accident), *bhūtāni* (natural elements), and *puruṣa* (primeval man, or the self, *ātman*, or God). Over the ages, many more doctrines have staked their claims. Of these, the doctrines of *bhūṭāni* and *svabhāva* may have been the precursors of materialism.

Concepts of Natural Elements in India and Greece

The separation of earth, air, fire, and water as the basic constituent elements of all natural objects comprehensible by the five senses marks the point of departure from mythology to philosophy. As in Greece, so in India, these four basic elements constitute the basis of much philosophical speculation, whether idealist or materialist. All scientific speculation, whether in the field of natural sciences or of medicine, accepts the concept of the elements called *bhūta*s or *mahābhūta*s that are at the root of all phenomena. Unlike the Greeks, however, Indian speculators spoke also of a fifth element, Aether (*ākāśa*, *śūnya, vyoma*), or emptiness (*śūnya*). All philosophical systems except the Cārvāka/Lokāyata adhered to the five-element formula, corresponding to the five senses. Thus, earth corresponds to smell, air to touch, fire to heat, and water to liquid. Even the earlier, pre-Cārvāka materialists had adopted it, which is one of the points on which the Cārvāka/Lokāyata differs from them. The medical compilation called the *Caraka-saṃhitā* is at base materialistic, but, unlike the Cārvāka/Lokāyata, it adheres to the five-element theory.

The Āstika and the Nāstika Systems of Philosophy

Originally there were three negativist systems: (1) Buddhist, (2) Jain, and (3) Cārvāka. But then, perhaps to match the number of affirmativist systems – namely, (1) Mīmāṃsā (also called *pūrva*-Mīmāṃsā), (2) Vedānta (also called *uttara*-Mīmāṃsā), (3) Sāṃkhya, (4) Yoga, (5) Nyāya, and (6) Vaiśeṣika – the negativist systems were also enumerated to become six: the four schools of Buddhist philosophy – Madhyamaka (or Mādhyamika), Yogācāra, Sautrāntika, and Vaibhāṣika – along with the Jain, and the Cārvāka (Sarasvatī 1977, 1).

Apart from this sixfold division, another distinction has been drawn on the basis of speculation (*tarka*). In this division, the Cārvāka, Buddhism, Jainism, Vaiśeṣika, Nyāya, and Sāṃkhya are treated as the Six Systems of Speculation (*ṣaṭtarkī*). In another account, the Cārvāka is replaced by Mīmāṃsā; in yet another, Vaiśeṣika is excluded and the Cārvāka is brought back (Gerschheimer 2007, 239–58).

Atheism Found in Both Āstika and Nāstika Systems

It is the adherence to the Vedas, the supposedly revealed text (according to the Mīmāṃsa school of philosophy) or one composed by God himself (according to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school of philosophy), that is the focal point in the Indian systems. Atheism is not at all the point at issue. There are other systems of philosophy, such as Sāṃkhya, that are atheistic yet Vedist – the same applies to the Cārvāka. The latter is condemned by the Vedist systems not because of its atheism, but because of its refusal to accept the Veda as an infallible source of knowledge and/or its denial of the Other World, heaven and hell, rebirth, etc. Atheism, of course, is condemned by the worshippers of God/gods, but that, too, is due to the Cārvākas' refusal to admit anything like religious merit (*dharma*).

The picture is no doubt confusing, but not incomprehensible. The Veda is considered to be superior to everything, including God, by the devoted Brahmanas; abiding by the Veda and the law books that are Veda-abiding is the essence of religiosity. Thus, the law books (of which there are eighteen) are unanimous in treating *nāstikatā* as a minor lapse (*upapātaka*), but not in the sense of its denial of existence of God/gods but for its defiance of the Other World and/or its denial of the authority of the Veda; disbelief in God is never explicitly mentioned. Only the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school takes up the question of the existence of God seriously and attempts to refute all atheistic systems, whether Vedic or non-Vedic (see the sections that follow).

The Atheist Buddha Is Assimilated in the List of the Ten Incarnations of God

Although the Buddha was, according to the Buddhist canonical texts, a thorough-going atheist, paradoxically enough at a particular juncture of history in the common era, he was included in the list of the Incarnations (*avatāra*s) of Viṣṇu in the Vaiṣṇava (Viṣṇuite) tradition, although his name does not occur in the Śaiva (worshippers of the god Śiva) tradition or the Śakti

(a goddess) tradition. The number of Incarnations in all these traditions was never fixed; new Incarnations are occasionally added. In the earliest list of the Incarnations there is no mention of the Buddha. There are only some creatures (fish, tortoise, etc.) and Rāma, the hero of the epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, along with Paraśurāma, a warlike sage of the Bhṛgu clan. However, the name of the Buddha occurs in a list of ten Incarnations first in the fifth century AD. He came to stay for a long time as the penultimate Incarnation in the list of ten. As a consequence, the Buddha and his followers are spared from censure in the later Purāṇas. In the earlier Purāṇas, for example in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 3.18, however, the Buddhist and the Jain monks are treated as belonging to the enemy camp, so much so that they can be employed to confuse the demons and thereby ensure their defeat in the war against the Gods. In fact, the Jains continued to be treated as enemies of the Vedic religion, whereas the Buddha and the Buddhists become conspicuous in their absence.

The list of Incarnations, however, is dynamic: some Incarnations are dropped, new Incarnations are added. There are two famous hymns in praise of the ten Incarnations, one composed by Śaṅkarācārya (or attributed to him) and the other by Jayadeva. The lists of the *avatāra*s are not identical. Śaṅkarācārya mentions Kṛṣṇa as an *avatāra*, whereas Jayadeva has Balarāma in his place. Both, however, mention the Buddha as the ninth Incarnation, but not before the fifth century AD (Hazra 1940, 25, 41, 125).

Heresiography Related to the Religions and Philosophies in India

Defining Heresiography/Heresiology

Every religion begets its own heresies – particularly in a country like India, where several religious communities continue to live side by side. The concept of heresy is widened to include (1) every other religious group and idea that doesn't conform to a particular religious community (Vedism vis-à-vis Buddhism, Jainism, and materialism, known by different names at different times); and (2) breakaway groups from a particular religious community.

Heresy is basically related to religion. In India, however, its scope was extended to philosophy as well. Thus, we read of a basic division of the philosophical systems into *nāstika* and *āstika*.

Heresy, a concept that originated with Christianity, can be applied to what is popularly known as Hinduism (both Vedic and Purāṇic). The list of

heretical doctrines and their followers will be longer than one might conceivably think, for even though some philosophical systems would declare themselves to be adhering to the Veda (e.g. Vaiśeṣika), other orthodox systems (e.g. non-dualist Vedānta) would call themselves anti-Vedic.

The heretic, generally known as *pāṣaṇḍa*/*pāṣaṇḍin*, means the follower of some non-Vedic philosophical systems, in addition to a large number of heterodox religious cults and their adherents. They include so many varieties that no exhaustive list of the heretic groups can be drawn up (for a specimen, see Hazra 1958–63, vol. 2, 552).

Heresy According to the Hindus (Vedists)

As we have shown above, even the self-proclaimed Veda-abiding philosophical systems and religious doctrines were branded 'heretical' by the orthodox ones. The accused parties would in turn call some other orthodox sects non-Vedic. Hence there is no fool-proof way to determine who was pro-Vedic and who was not Vedic – it all depended on the point of view of the accuser. Śaṅkarācārya (ninth century), for example, was as much opposed to Buddhism not merely as a religious doctrine but also as a philosophical system or systems (see Śaṅkarācārya's commentary on *Brahma-sūtra* 2.2.17–27, 28–32) and Jain philosophy (2.2.33–36), as to Vaiśeṣika (2.2.11–17), and even Sāmkhya (2.2.1–10), who loudly proclaimed their adherence to the Vedas. Even the Bhāgavatas (followers of a Vaiṣṇava sect) were not spared.

Taking both philosophical systems and religious cults belonging to the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition (the former prevalent among the well-to-do and/or the twice-born (*dvija*) sections of the people; the latter among the downtrodden and the marginalized, Śūdras in particular) creates a basic problem: are not philosophy and religion being treated as one and the same? In spite of the fact that *darśana* in Sanskrit cannot be separated from religious beliefs and associations, there are areas that indeed are secular. They are not affected by religious considerations (see Bhattacharya 2016, 25–32).

One reason why the philosophical systems and religious doctrines can be traced together is that the yardstick for judging heresy and orthodoxy is the same: whether or not the system or cult under consideration acknowledges the Veda as the ultimate authority in all matters, mundane or extra-mundane. The only reason for calling them *nāstika* was that all of them were deniers of the authority of the Veda. Originally, the division between the *āstika* and the *nāstika* was based on the acceptance of the existence of the implied Other World, such as religious merit and demerit, heaven and hell, and rebirth.

Over time, however, belief in the existence of the Other World was silently replaced by faith in the veracity of the Veda.

This is why, or rather this is how, the Veda became the criterion for separating/distinguishing the sheep from the wolves. One might object that the criterion is absolutely religious – that there is nothing philosophical in it. In reply, it could be pointed out that right from the time of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, the question of what happened after death had become the philosophical focus of the debate. While some people claimed that there was a post-death existence, others denied this position. These two contrary positions had already given rise to doubt (*vicikitsā*) among the people, which is the prime mover of philosophy (cf. *saṃśaya* (doubt) in the *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.23, which is accepted as a category (*padārtha*) in the Nyāya philosophy).

The basic difference between religion and philosophy lies in their attitudes towards doubt. Religion thrives on credo – belief – whereas philosophy proceeds through doubt and, hence, argument. So much for the concept of heresy from the Brahmanical point of view. Since the words *a-vaidika* (non-Vedic) and *nāstikya* (doctrine of the no-sayers) are already found in the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* (7.8), it is certain that some views were already prevalent by the time this Upaniṣad was redacted. Most probably the work is post-Buddha: the reference to *nairātmyavāda* (the doctrine of no-soul) in all probability is to Buddhism. But that is not the only doctrine (or philosophical system) that the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* is concerned with. There is a fascinating list of non-Vedic doctrines, mysteriously mixed with some professions that are vehemently condemned in the Upaniṣad. This is the first list of heresies to be found in the Brahmanical literature.

Between the two epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, the first refers occasionally to the *nāstika*s, but the second one is replete with the denunciation of infidels. The Bhārgava redactors of the *Mahābhārata* missed no opportunity to denigrate *nāstika*hood and the *nāstika*s. Those who did not believe in the existence of the (extra-corporal) soul were condemned as garrulous yet widely erudite; they moved all over the world (*Mahābhārata*, critical edition, 12.19.24). But seldom, however, the *nāstika*s are specified as materialists or as followers of the Buddha and/or Mahāvīra or belonging to any other religious cult. *Nāstika* is an omnibus term for condemnation and abuse for all disbelievers in Hinduism.

What is lacking in the Itihāsas like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* is more than compensated by the Purāṇas. They were all composed in the common era – some before 1000, some after. Together they constitute a storehouse for

heresiological studies. The Jains, as R. N. Dandekar has observed, are the chief antagonists of the Hindus, now a vast crowd of worshippers of hundreds of gods and goddesses; the Buddhists come next. References to the materialists are few and far between, but their doctrines were not unknown to the redactors of the Purāṇas. The problem is that their views were sometimes mixed up with those of the Jains, whom the authors of the Purāṇas knew better (Dandekar 1993, 737–53). After the adoption of the Buddha in the list of ten *avatāra*s (Incarnations of Viṣṇu) in or around the fifth century AD, the Purāṇas spared the Buddhists from their list of heretics, although the Jains and the Lokāyatikas continued to be treated as enemies of Vedism.

No single Purāṇa will supply the names of the heretical sects, but the long index of 'Heretical (*pāṣaṇḍa*) Sects' in Hazra (1958–63, vol. 2, 552) will be an eye-opener to many.

Heresy According to the Buddhists: Heresiology in the Tipiṭaka (Tripiṭaka)

If the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* 7.8 is the *locus classicus* of heresiology according to the Brahmanical theologians, its Buddhist counterpart is to be found in the very first discourse in the *Long Discourses* (*Dīgha-nikāya*). It is called the 'Brahmajāla Sutta', translated variously as 'The all-embracing net of views', 'The supreme net', and others.

Anukul Chandra Banerjee provides a convenient summary of this discourse (1979, 135–8). Aside from the non-Buddhists in general, it also names and enumerates philosophical speculations and theological doctrines. Among the former, the doctrine of annihilation (*ucchedavāda*), with its seven varieties, is mentioned, although no details of the seven doctrines are provided. The doctrine of annihilation is associated with Ajita Kesakambala, the mendicant wearing a hair-blanket, saying 'no' to every religious practice and belief current in his times. A summary exposition of the doctrine is given in the 'Discourse Concerning the Effects of Becoming a Monk' (or '. . . of Leading a Contemplative Life') ('Sāmañña-phala-sutta', Discourse no. 47). Here we find the names of Puraṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, Ajita Kesakambala, Pakudha Kaccāyana, and Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta. How far the numbers of each of the doctrines enumerated in the 'Brahmajāla Sutta' (Discourse no. 1) and whether there were really sixty-two heresies mentioned in the Discourse are open to question. But the names of ten major views (*diṭṭhiyo*) given in Sutta bear out the evidence of a philosophical turmoil that north India witnessed in the sixth or fifth century BC.

In later Buddhist literature we come across many other heresies that the leaders of the order (*saṃgha*) had to deal with.

Heresy According to the Jains

The list of heresies from the Jain point of view is provided in the opening sections of *The Book Composed Against* [*Heretical*] *Sūtra Works* (*Sūyagadasūya*, *Sūtra-kṛtāṅga-sūtra* in Sanskrit), 1.1.1.7–17 and 2.1.15–17; unfortunately the authors/redactors were content to mention the heretics rather vaguely as *eke* (one), *apare* (other), etc. without mentioning their names. Most of them refer to materialists of one sort or the other. All of them were five-elementalists (*bhūta-pañcaka-vādins*), that is, pre-Cārvāka. The Cārvākas were four-elementalists (*bhūta-catuṣṭaya-vādins*), leaving *ākāśa* or *vyoma* or *śūnya* (Aether) out of consideration. The omission was presumably because it is not a sense-object. This was the major distinction that marks Cārvāka materialism apart from the pre-Cārvāka doctrines, such as Bhūtavāda, which is an exact translation of elementalism/materialism mentioned both in the *Maṇimēkalai*, and the *Nīlakeci*, both written in Old Tamil, and *The Book Composed Against* [*Heretical*] *Sutra Works* mentioned above. The learned commentators of these works could not always properly identify the philosophical schools or doctrines that the texts sought to refute. In several instances, Śīlānka, a commentator on the *Maṇimēkalai*, offers alternatives, such as the Lokāyatas or the Sāṃkhyas (as in the gloss in *Sūtra-kṛtāṅga-sūtra* 1.2.20, English trans. 342 n1). As well as the materialists, the Buddhists, too, are the Jain's targets of attack.

A much fuller list of religious heretics is found in Siddharṣi's *Allegorical Tale of the Mundane World* (*Upamita-bhava-prapañcā-kathā*), an eleventh-century Jain work. It is a fascinating list of the strangest customs and conventions followed by non-Jain (presumably belonging to the Brahmanical fold) or non-Brahmanical sects but not associated with either the Jains or the Buddhists, nor the materialists. Jacobi provided an 'Alphabetical list of words not found in Sanskrit Dictionaries'. Most of them refer to a number of heretical sects that have disappeared after Siddharṣi, leaving no trace of their doctrines. It is indeed impossible to determine who the Gaja-dhvajas were; one can only surmise of a sect who had the image of an elephant on their flag (548, line 2). Some of the names are fairly well known, such as Śākya (Buddhist), Traidaṇḍika (ascetics carrying three staves), Śaiva (worshipper of Śiva) (547). But who were the Kāmardekas, Govratas, and Saṅkha-dhamas (547)? Siddharṣi mentions both the Kālāmukhas and the Kāpālikas. Apparently, they were two different sects, distinct from the Mṛgacārins.

Whatever be the nature and customs of these communities, they must have been non-Jain in origin. However, it is not possible to say whether they were all non-Vedic or whether at least some of them belong to the Little Tradition, such as those mentioned in the *Mait Up*, 7.8.

Heresiology as a subject has many points of interest. Although something can be known about the heresies in the tradition of Christianity and Islam, practically nothing is said about India and her three major religions: Vedism/Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Here is an attempt to provide some information about the views that were considered heretical by the custodians of these three major religions – this account is not exhaustive, and there is room for further enquiry.

Why is heresiology so important? First, the heresies are collectively a reminder that every dogma once codified and sanctioned by the gurus and religious law-makers inevitably begets its opposite. The overall picture is the battle between credo and science, as Walter Ruben formulated.

Second, what is heresy to one is true faith to another. Both Jainism and Buddhism, with all their sects and sub-sects, are branded as heretics by the Brahmanical authorities. The Jains and the Buddhists themselves in their turn consider all Brahminical and Veda-abiding religions as heresies. The term is freely used to suggest two kinds of people. The first are the deniers of the Other World (meaning the materialists in general); the second refers to 'the defilers of the Veda' (*veda-nindaka*), thereby including not only the materialists but the Jains and the Buddhists as well – thus, not only the deniers of the Other World, but also the non-adherents to the Veda. The two articles of faith, of Brahmanism, are included. Belief in the existence of the Other World (later defined as heaven and hell) and devotion to the inerrancy of the Veda together constitute the criterion for determining what is heretical and what is not.

With the Jains and the Buddhists, on the contrary, non-injury (*ahiṃsā*) is almost the sole yardstick. They used to denounce the Vedic practice of sacrificing animals in the Jajna and the consumption of intoxicating drinks (as in the Sautrāmaṇī–yāga, a special kind of sacrifice). For the Jains, there was a special objection to the marriage of the gods and, more particularly, sexual licentiousness (as evidenced in the epigrams found in the *Padma Purāṇa*, Sṛṣṭikhaṇḍa, chapter 13). Celibacy is the rule of the Jain mendicants; sexual intercourse itself was taboo. Since both Vedic and Purāṇic tales abound in such lapses on the part of the gods as adultery (including incest), they are condemned, and their worshippers too are deemed to be sinners.

How Atheism Is Sought to be Refuted by a Theist Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Philosopher

Udayana (twelfth century), in his *Handspray of Flowers of Nyāya* (*Nyāya-kusumāñjali*), seeks to prove the existence of God by refuting the views of five atheist schools, namely the materialist Cārvāka, the Vedist Mīmāṃsaka, the Buddhist, the Digambara (sky-clad, that is, unclad) Jain, and the Sāṃkhya. Udayana first gives the opponent's view and then offers his refutation. Thus, we have both arguments against the existence of God and then the theistic position.

Udayana's arguments are as follows:

The opposition to the materialist Cārvāka is based on the denial of any supernatural cause (of another world) as *adṛṣṭa*, the merit and demerit of our actions.

Now, the performance of the Vedic rites, it is asserted in the Vedas, leads to the attainment of heaven, which consists of unmixed happiness, untouched by misery, exemption from the onset of pain in the future, and obtained at will. Such happiness is unattainable in this world because in this world the enjoyment of happiness unalloyed by misery is not possible. It is common knowledge that heaven as the fruit of Vedic rites is not attained following their performance, but in the remote future after death. But as the Vedic rites are but so many actions that fade away just after their performance and do not last till the attainment of heaven, they cannot be the cause of heaven. To obviate this anomaly it is postulated that the performance gives rise to an unseen merit or force that lasts until the attainment of heaven and the performance of Vedic rites serves as the cause of attainment of heaven only by virtue of the unseen merit which it leaves behind as the connecting link. It is also seen that a past apprehension becomes the cause of the future memory only through an impression arising out of it. This merit is called the function of the Vedic rites. It is unconscious and cannot produce fruit without being operated by a conscious being, as it is seen that unconscious carts and carriages function only when they are operated by some conscious being. The individual souls, though conscious, cannot be the operators of merit. He who conducts a thing does so because he has a direct knowledge about that thing. A mason having a direct knowledge of an iron instrument is seen to conduct that instrument. The individual souls have no direct knowledge of merit, as merit is suprasensuous. So, that superhuman being, who has direct knowledge of merit and can operate it, is God. Thus, God is proved as the

conductor of merit. Similarly, the Naiyāyika seeks to prove God as the creator of the Vedas and of world order.

Here, the Cārvāka protests thus: of course, he maintains that God as the conductor of merit can be proved if there is something that is called merit, at all. But there is no proof of merit, at all. Merit is not a perceptible object that it may be admitted. Inference also cannot prove the existence of merit because inference itself is not a source of knowledge; inference is possible if there is the knowledge of human concomitance at its back. But human resources are incompetent to produce knowledge of universal validity. So, as inference is not a source of knowledge, so is verbal testimony, arising out of knowledge dependent on that of convention (*saṅketa*), depending on inference. There is also nothing that is called the soul, different from the body, which may attain heaven and enjoy heavenly bliss in a future world. But the body is the soul and it has consciousness.

This view of the Cārvāka is sought to be refuted thus:

In this world of men all are not equal; some are happy, some are miserable, and so on. Thus a world of difference is met with here. There must be some cause of this difference without which such a thing cannot originate. There is no cause to be seen in this regard, so an unforeseen cause must be admitted to explain this difference. If there were nothing that is called merit, an unforeseen function of the Vedic rites, no sane man would have been inclined to perform them at the expense of so much money and energy. These rites do not produce any result whatsoever, which can be seen here in this world of men. It cannot be said people perform these religious rites for gain, fame, honour, etc., because those who do not aspire after these ends and live in lonely places like mountain caves and forests also perform them. If there is nothing as merit, then gain etc. also are impossible out of religious observances, for, people do give money to the virtuous considering it to be an act of merit, otherwise such giving away of money earned at the expense of so much energy cannot arise at all. It cannot be imagined that a certain cheat conceived of Vedic rites as resulting in the attainment of heaven, etc., and performed them himself for arousing faith in others and thus cheated; people are inclined to perform Vedic rites and sacrifices. There is no fool who may spend for an unworthy cause money earned at the expense of so much energy and suffer himself by fasting, etc., for cheating others. The happiness of cheating others is certainly not covetable at the cost of a world of so much misery indeed.

Moreover, inference is also a source of knowledge. The invalidity of inference is shown by means of the doubt of invariability. But the doubt of

invariability is dependent on inference. To explain it by an example: 'the mountain is fiery because of smoke' is an example of inference. The smoke invariably relates to the fire – where there is smoke, there is fire, so fire is inferred from smoke. Then, if the invalidity of inference is maintained on the doubt of invariability between the fire and the smoke, then it may be said that the doubt of invariability does not arise in the case of the fire and smoke that are seen and known by perception, but there may be a doubt of invariability between them in a different time or space when they are not seen. The knowledge of fire and smoke in a different time or space is not attained by perception but by inference. So, it is seen that inference different from perception is also a source of knowledge. If there is no inference as a source of knowledge, then it cannot be said that a cause cannot prove an effect on account of the doubt of invariability.

If the body were the soul, then there would have been no memory in old age of what was apprehended in childhood, as there is a remarkable difference in the bodies of childhood and old age. A thing seen by one is certainly not remembered by another. Therefore, by such other causes the soul being different from the body should also be admitted.

In this connection, the relation of cause and effect, the eternal succession of causes and effects, the theory of origination without a cause, the category of energy maintained by the Mīmāṃsists, the theory of Brahman's causality, the theory of Prakṛti's causality, the theory of merit's being in an enjoyer, the causality of non-existence, the agency of intellect, the agency of the soul, the theory of momentariness, the naturality and adjunctivity of causality, and the causality of an eternally superatomic being have been critically and fully discussed in this chapter as an answer to the first opposition to the theory of the existence of God, as based on the denial of any supernatural cause (of another world) as *adṛṣṭa*, the merit and demerit of our actions.

The opposition of the Mīmāṃsaka (follower of the Mīmāṃsa doctrine) is based on the possibility of automatic fruition of certain causes of another world (as sacrifices), even if God is allowed to be non-existent.

The Vedas are eternal and are not created by anyone, so God cannot be proved as the creator of the Vedas. The Vedas are eternal as the Vedas read by Devdatta is recognized as that read by Maitra. The eternality of the sounds is also proved by virtue of such recognitions as 'this is that sound *ga* (*gakāra*)'. So, how is it possible that there should be a creator of the Vedas?

This view of the Mīmāṃsaka is sought to be refuted thus:

The Vedas are also not eternal but on account of their being so many sentences are pronounced like other sentences. A sentence is no proof on account of there being frailties like mistakes etc. in it of the speaker. The sentences of the Vedas become proofs on account of their being accepted as such by great seers. So the speaker of them is proved to have frailties like mistakes etc., and He is God, the Providence. The sound of *ga* etc., are also not eternal because production and destruction of them are experienced by perception in cases like 'the sound of *ga* has been produced, the sound of *ga* has been destroyed. The sound of *ga* as heard before no longer exists', and so on. Thus, as the production and destruction of the particular species of sound is experienced by perception, the recognition like 'this is that sound *ga*' should be understood in reference to the genus of the sound *ga*, etc., like 'this is that flame of the lamp' and in the case of hair cropped and grown again, they are these hairs, etc.

In this connection, the extraneous character of the validity of knowledge, dissolution of the world, the gradual degradation of the Vedic observers, and so on, have been critically and fully discussed in this chapter as an answer to the second opposition to the theory of the existence of God, as based on the possibility of automatic fruition of certain causes of another world (as sacrifices), even if God is allowed to be non-existent.

The opposition of the Saugata or Buddhist is based on the existence of proofs which show the non-existence of God.

The Naiyāyika (follower of the Nyāya doctrine) also admits that inference does not avail in a case which is directly barred by non-perception. So, God cannot be proved by inference as He is directly barred by non-perception. Moreover, it is seen in the world that a creator must be a person. The Naiyāyikas think that God is impersonal, so on account of His being an impersonal God cannot be creator and consequently the proof of His existence as the creator of the earth, and so on, falls to the ground. Also, he who does something does it with some end in view. God is, the Naiyāyikas maintain, someone, all the desires of whom have ever been satisfied, who cannot have any end in view for which he may do something.

The view of the Saugata or Buddhist is sought to be refuted in the third chapter, thus:

Of course, no inference is possible in any case directly barred by non-perception, but negation is ascertained by the non-perception of a perceivable object and not by non-perception itself. If that be so, then there would have been a negation of the sky, etc., that are supersensuous. God is not an object of direct perception and so it is not right to say that there is no God because He is not directly perceived. A thing is inferred in relation to some locus, as fire in the mountain. If it is inferred that there is no God because he is impersonal and so has no end, then God, as the substratum of the negation of creatorship, cannot but be admitted. If that is not admitted, then in relation to what locus is to be inferred the negation of creatorship? There is no proof that the creator must necessarily be a personal being, as there is no bar against the contrary. In the case where there is smoke there must be fire, the relation of cause and effect between fire and smoke is the bar against the contrary. Although God has no selfish end in view, favour towards creatures is his objective.

In this connection, the view that an unreal thing can never properly either be the subject or the object of a negation, then the legitimate non-perception, the inference barring God, the theory of the Cārvāka of activity out of probability only in spite of an absence of the validity of inference as a source of knowledge, the validity of inference as a source of knowledge, the prevention of doubt by *reductio ad absurdum*, the theory of similarity being a separate category, the analogy as explained by the Mīmāṃsakas, the analogy of the Naiyāyikas, the analogy as another source of valid knowledge, testimony as no inference, the theory of Prabhākara that the testimony of ordinary people is not a source of valid knowledge, the testimony as another source of valid knowledge, presumption as not a different source of valid knowledge and non-perception as not a different source of valid knowledge have been critically and fully discussed in this chapter as an answer to the third opposition to the theory of the existence of God as based on the existence of proofs which show the non-existence of God.

The opposition of the Digambara Jaina is based on the opinion that, even if God does exist, he can neither be an agent nor instrument of true knowledge.

God as admitted by the Naiyāyikas has no valid ground for existence. When the word *pramāṇa* is derived as having the instrumental sense, it is then indicative of an instrument of true knowledge; and when it is derived in the nominative sense, it is then indicative of the subject of true knowledge. God is an instrument of knowledge on account of there being no proof of his being

an instrument of true knowledge to us. The Naiyāyikas admit that the knowledge of God is eternal and all-embracing. No eternal thing should possibly have an instrument or agent. So, God cannot be the instrument or agent of his own true knowledge even. Nor is the knowledge of God a true one. True knowledge is that which is produced in the case of an object not known. So, knowledge as recollected arises in the case of an object perceived before, which is called memory and is not true knowledge. There is nothing unknown to God who is omniscient, so that his knowledge of something may be a true (novel) one. Therefore, the knowledge of God is not true knowledge, nor is he an instrument of true knowledge. So, what is the faith in the words of a person who does not possess true knowledge?

This view of the Digambara Jaina is sought to be refuted thus:

Though the knowledge of God is eternal, God becomes the locus of it, because an agent is that wherein an action subsists. So, God is the cause of true knowledge as the word pramāna is derived as having a nominative sense meaning an agent or subject of true knowledge. It is also not that the knowledge produced in the case of an object not known is true knowledge. It is also not that the knowledge produced in the case of a single object, in succession, the succeeding ones cannot be true, and the false knowledge as 'this is silver' in the case of a shell also should become a case of true knowledge. But the definition of a valid knowledge is right apprehension. Memory is not an apprehension and so it is not a true knowledge. The knowledge of God is right and at the same time an apprehension, too, so it must be a valid knowledge.

In this connection, the definition of valid knowledge, the quality of being known, the regularity of the objects of knowledge, the nature of the subject and the validity of knowledge, and so on, have been critically and fully discussed in this chapter as an answer to the fourth opposition based on the opinion that, even if God exists, He can neither be an agent nor an instrument of true knowledge.

The opposition of Sāṃkhya is based on the absence of any argument to prove God's existence.

There is no proof whatever in the case of God. The inference of God as a creator of the universe is not possible, because Prakṛti, the primordial energy, is the creator of the universe. The Veda is also not a proof of the existence of God as it has no bearing upon its own import but points to the injunctions for meditation, etc.

This view of the Sāṃkhyas is principally refuted in the fifth chapter, thus:

As the production of a jar, etc. requires an agent for its coming into being so also is the case with the creation of earth, etc. He who is the creator of the earth, etc., is God. It is not possible for Prakṛti, the primordial energy, to be a creator, who must necessarily be a conscious being. Thus, the action by means of which the conjunction of two atoms (*anu*) forming into *dvyaṇuka*s at the beginning of the creation, too, is produced by the effort of God, because in the production of actions, conscious efforts are necessary. The Vedic injunctions as 'One should worship God, etc.', are also proofs of the existence of God. There the words, 'God etc.', point to injunctions by their very imports like the word 'heaven' in the case of 'one desiring heaven should perform sacrifices'; otherwise, no faith would have been there in heaven, too.

In this connection, the authorship of the Vedas, the superiority of the inference proving God to that disproving Him, discussions in its favour and the exposition of the fallacies of the opposite views, the definition of an injunction and the volitional knowledge, etc. have been critically and fully discussed in this chapter as an answer to the fifth opposition based on the absence of any argument to prove His existence.

Thus, the controverters of the existence of God, the Cārvāka, the Mīmāṃsaka, the Buddhist, the Digambara Jain, and the Sāṃkhya, were opposed by Udayana.

India Meets the West in the Nineteenth Century

India came to know of western atheism, agnosticism, scepticism, and the like through the introduction of Positivism by European teachers and their Indian pupils in the newly founded colleges in the metropolitan cities, such as Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. Indological research by both European and Indian scholars also led to the discovery of the ancient Indian non-conformist and atheist tradition.

With the arrival of the East India Company and the introduction of modern western education in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in different parts of India, a new era began in the history of atheism, not only in India but across the whole subcontinent. The foundation of Hindu College in 1817 in Calcutta (now renamed Kolkata) is a landmark in the history of Bengal (the province is now divided into two parts: one, a state in the Republic of India, called West Bengal, the other, the eastern part, a new state since 1971, called Bangladesh). This college had a young Eurasian in its faculty. His name was Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809–32). He was a freethinker and an

admirer of Bacon, Locke, and Hume, and of the Scottish School of Philosophy, the agnostics of the eighteenth century, such as James Beatie, William Robertson, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, and Dugald Stewart. His influence on the teenaged students, not much younger than himself, was immense and far-reaching. They formed an unofficial group variously called the Young Bengal, the Young Calcutta, and the like. They used to arrange lectures and initiate discussions among themselves about religion (particularly Hinduism), the eradication of social evils, and so on. They formed associations and societies for the 'acquisition of general knowledge', and published journals such as *The Bengal Spectator* (bilingual), *The Enquirer*, and more in their later lives. When attempts at the introduction of widow remarriage were initiated by a Sanskrit scholar, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–91), they endorsed the move and provided all sorts of assistance and advice. The proceedings of the societies they had formed are full of surprises: everything under the sun was being studied, cultivated, and disseminated to the people at large. Most of them came from middle-class families with an orthodox background. Their revolt against their elders and the religious faith held by their forefathers was phenomenal. It is not that they would leave a lasting mark on the society through their rebellion, but they did give a tremendous shake to the existing social system and the prevalent religious practices.

Modern European education also produced a new awareness concerning the several contending schools of western philosophy among the students of the next generation. Of all the systems, Positivism as formulated by Auguste Comte (1798–1857) proved to be the most pervasive. All sorts of English-educated people – college students, teachers, lawyers, social reformers, and the like – joined the band of Positivists in Bengal. The attraction to Comte was his atheism. Through his works, the Bengali Positivists began to preach atheism, not only in the English schools but also in the Government Sanskrit College. It was in the nineteenth century that the word *nāstika* also came to signify 'atheist'; the two earlier meanings were superseded.

Neither the number of the Bengal Positivists nor their area of influence should be exaggerated. Nevertheless, the movement gave birth to a memorable character, called Jagamohan in the novel of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), *Chaturaṅga* (*Four Sections*; first published in book form in 1916, three English translations are available), who lived and died a true atheist. He is the only memorable atheist character in Bangla literature (for further details, see Bhattacharya 2012, 43–51). Although Rabindranath Tagore was a believer in a personal God when he composed this novel and confused Auguste Comte's views (Positivism) with Jeremy Bentham's (1748–1832)

doctrine of 'The greatest good for the greatest number' (Utilitarianism), his reference to Positivism is nevertheless significant.

At the same time, both European and Indian Sanskrit scholars joined hands in discovering lost texts and issued them from the newly introduced printing press. Thus, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the social reformer and educationist mentioned before, edited for the first time *The Digest/Compendium of All Philosophies* (*Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha*) that were current in ancient and medieval India. This fourteenth-century work begins with a short exposition of the materialist Cārvāka system and concludes with Advaita (non-dualist) Vedānta, an idealist system. The first chapter was soon translated into several European and Indian languages. The publication of a base text (not the earliest one), called *The Sāṃkhya Aphorisms*, also helped many students to learn atheism via the Sāṃkhya. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay wrote an exposition of this atheistic school of philosophy in both English and Bangla. In his novel, *Devī Chaudhurāṇī* (1884), part 3, chapter 2, he made Niśā, a female companion of Praphulla, the heroine of the novel, quote an aphorism: 'God is invalid' (*Sāṃkhya-pravacana-sūtra*, 1.92). All this, however, happened when India had already become a part of the modern world.

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8

Christian Europe

IAN LOGAN

Introduction

It has been a matter of controversy among historians whether there existed anything resembling the modern phenomenon of doxastic atheism in the medieval world (Goetz 2015, 613). The reason for this is straightforward enough: there is no coherent body of literature on which to draw if one wants to give an account of atheism in medieval Latin Christendom.[1] Although there is a variety of literature providing potential glimpses of what we might consider as possible examples of atheism in medieval life, there is no first-hand account from anyone expressing atheistic views that are unambiguously atheistic, and when others provide accounts of putative atheists, it is difficult to determine that they are atheists in a sense that twenty-first-century readers would recognize. If atheism is present, we will have to find echoes of it in the extant literature written by believers who had little or no direct interest in atheism as such.

The term 'atheism' can be defined in different ways, and one aim of this chapter is to establish whether there is a sense of 'atheism' that can be employed legitimately as a category to describe a feature of medieval society and culture. To this end, I will assume two distinct accounts of atheism:

1. The rejection of the existence of the God of Christian faith and any equivalent god(s) of other religions: doxastic atheism.[2]

1 In order to avoid too general an approach, my main focus is on developments in western Europe from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. However, my thesis can be applied more widely both geographically and chronologically.

2 An atheist, on this account, is someone who says, 'God does not exist', and means that proposition to hold universally. Thus, Jews and Muslims, for instance, are excluded from this definition, since, although they reject the existence of the Triune God of Christianity, they possess a belief in a God who is equivalent to the Christian God.

2. The failure to behave as if such a God exists, even on the part of doxastic theists: non-doxastic atheism.[3]

In this chapter I will look, first, at where suggestions of atheism might have been encountered in the life of the Church and in the public square. Second, I will look at the way atheists are presented or perceived in literature and in philosophy and theology. Third, I will investigate some alleged atheists and note the difficulties facing those who argue for their atheism. Fourth, I will look at how atheism was diagnosed and characterized. I show that the medieval world was concerned to address a 'weaker', non-doxastic atheism, rather than the 'stronger', doxastic atheism that many modern accounts imagine to be present. In the conclusion, I make some suggestions as to why this should have been the case.

Encountering Atheism

An important place to look for indications of atheism is in medieval religious practice, particularly in the practice of penance and confession. However, the record of what took place in the confessional was suppressed as a result of the seal of the confessional enforced by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which also stipulated the requirement for baptized Christians to make annual confession and to receive communion at Easter (Denzinger 2010, §§812–14). If we could access the confessional, we might hear something of the medieval attitude to belief in God and the kinds of problems individuals faced in their commitment or otherwise to this belief. But what Alexander Murray has called 'cracks in the Seal' of the confessional prove difficult to find (Murray 2015, 55). However, one such 'crack' is supplied by Thomas of Cantimpré (*c.* 1200 to *c.* 1272) in his *Bonum universale de apibus* (*The Book of Bees*).[4] The anecdotes contained in this book are intended to provide clerics with material they can employ when preaching. In some instances, Cantimpré claims to have been an eyewitness or to base his account on what he had heard in the confessional. The main concern of Cantimpré and his fellow clergy is with the vices of luke-warm Catholics. They 'wallow in sin', which, according to Giordano da Rivalto (1260–1311) 'is nothing other than to say *you wish* God did

3 Hugh of Saint Victor's account of those who practise the faith externally without an internal commitment as being 'far from the faith' falls under the second account of atheism employed here (Hugh of Saint Victor 1951, 171 [I, 10, 4]).

4 For a French edition and translation of much of Thomas of Cantimpré's text, see Platelle (1997). Translations into English are from Platelle's French edition and are my own.

not exist' (Murray 1972, 97). However, Cantimpré shows no interest in doxastic atheism as such.

Peter of Cornwall (*c.* 1140–1221), Prior of Holy Trinity, Aldgate, wrote his *Book of Revelations* around the year 1200. In it he seeks to provide convincing evidence that 'God, angels and the souls of men exist, and live after the death of the body'. He does this because 'there are some who, thinking that God does not exist', believe that the world is 'ruled by chance' (Easting and Sharpe 2013, 75).[5] It is not clear whether Peter has encountered any of these unbelievers in London, but the pastoral responsibilities of Holy Trinity for those living and working in the City of London would have brought Peter into contact with 'the everyday materialism of a mercantile centre' (Easting and Sharpe 2013, 53). That there were different degrees of belief and scepticism in such an environment would not be surprising. But what we lack is clear evidence concerning particular individuals or groups.

The culture of the public square might provide opportunities for encountering expressions of unbelief on the part of 'loose speakers' or 'tavern unbelievers' as opposed to 'the genuine heretic' (Thomson 1965, 242; Reynolds 1991, 38). But recorded history provides little information that might point to atheism in such circumstances. According to Cantimpré, there is no more favourable opportunity for the devil to trick the faithful than when they indulge in drinking and eating to excess. To show this, he recounts the story of a drinker in a tavern whose careless talk leads him to sell his soul to the devil (*Book of Bees*, II, 56, 2). To the amusement of his colleagues, the man is willing to sell his soul cheaply, for it will not survive death and has no lasting value. The devil arrives and agrees to buy the man's soul for the price of some wine. In such anecdotes we hear something of the culture of the tavern, and of the kinds of discussions that might take place there. Scepticism about the existence of an eternal soul calls into question the teaching of the Church on the matter, but is not to be equated with atheism in the modern sense. Though from a medieval perspective, to say that God cannot create eternal souls is to limit his omnipotence and thus to leave oneself open to accusations of denying God in some sense.

In his *Dialogue of a Christian with a Heathen*, Gilbert Crispin (*c.* 1045–1117/18) describes how he is taken to a meeting in a tavern, where he witnesses a discussion between two philosophers, one a Christian and the other a heathen (Crispin 1986b, 62). The first and longest part of the dialogue contains Gilbert's putative record of the discussion. The heathen is not an

5 See Zaleski (1988, 88) for the suggestion that such an unbeliever is a straw man.

atheist; but what is interesting for our purposes is that there could take place discussions on potentially controversial theological and philosophical subjects outside the purview of church and state. In Gilbert's account, one has to pass through an outer area in which students are discussing grammar and logic before being admitted by invitation to the location of the dialogue within the tavern itself (Crispin 1986b, 61f.). The allegorical meaning is clear, but does not preclude the use of imagery that reflects what goes on in daily life.

Atheism in Literature

In the *Inferno* (Canto XI) of Dante (1265–1321), in the inner ring of the seventh circle of hell are found those who blaspheme and deny God:

> One can be violent against the Godhead, one's heart denying and blaspheming Him and scorning nature and the good in her; so, with its sign, the smallest ring has sealed both Sodom and Cahors and all of those who speak in passionate contempt of God. (Alighieri 1995, 103)

Neither the references to Sodom (homosexuality) nor to Cahors (usury?) correlate directly to what we would expect in terms of denying God's existence – that is, atheism. Heretics are found in the sixth circle, but they do not appear to be atheists. However, it does include the Epicureans, who are there because they teach that the soul dies with the body.

The High Middle German poem *Das Annolied* (late eleventh century) provides an example of the knight Arnold's vassal, Volprecht, who despairs of God and seeks the assistance of the devil, to whom he pledges his loyalty. The 'foolish man' is led astray by the devil, who had 'proscribed the whole Christian faith for him'. After blaspheming against God and the saints, including Saint Anno, he is subjected to terrible physical ordeals until he calls on Saint Anno, by whose miraculous action he is restored. Here again we see portrayed the rejection of God, which nevertheless retains belief in what is rejected (Dunphy 2003, 46–8).

O. Pluta seeks to find evidence of atheism in the *Decameron* of Boccaccio (1313–75). The two examples Pluta chooses to give are the stories of Ser Ceparello da Prato (Boccaccio 2013, 24–37) and Guido Cavalcanti (Boccaccio 2013, 499–501). In the case of Ser Ceparello, Pluta claims that 'From a psychological point of view, it thus seems more than plausible to assume that [Ceparello] is a non-believer', and that 'We must thus assume that [Ceparello] was meant to represent an atheist' (Pluta 2011, 123f.). But

Boccaccio does not say that Ser Ceparello is an atheist. He is exceptionally wicked, but one does not have to be an atheist to be exceptionally wicked. Satan, after all, is not an atheist. The story of Guido Cavalcanti is the story, according to Pluta, of an Epicurean theist, 'an atheist in the narrow sense of the word, i.e. he would undoubtedly deny the God of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions' (Pluta 2011, 127). I am not convinced of the benefits of the kind of analysis of literary texts that Pluta engages in here, nor of the 'psychological' analysis of fictional characters as a substitute for real-world evidence. However, it does show what a plastic term 'atheism' can be. Pluta assumes that it would not be possible for someone who excoriates God without any remorse to be anything but a doxastic atheist. But this fails to see the point that once one considers oneself damned by God, there is no incentive to refrain from the worst sins, as in the case of the suicide of the lay-brother recounted in the *Dialogus miraculorum* of Caesarius of Heisterbach (*c.* 1170 to *c.* 1240). He 'can no longer fight against God' and drowns himself in a pool near his monastery. Caesarius explains: 'He did not indeed doubt in his faith, but rather despaired of salvation' (Caesarius of Heisterbach 1850, Distinctio Quarta, Capitulum XLVII, 210f.),[6] which ironically is identified in the Catholic tradition with the unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [henceforth *ST*] IIa:IIae 14, 2, *sed contra*).

Atheism in Philosophy and Theology

Throughout the medieval period there did exist some knowledge of ancient philosophers, including atheists. Latin accounts of Greek thought were available even before the rediscovery of Aristotle – for instance, in some of Cicero's works, and in the works of Augustine (354–430). Lucretius' exposition of Epicurean philosophy in *De rerum natura* was extant 'from the era of the Church Fathers to the twelfth century' (Aurelian 2011, 122–5), but then almost disappears. Seneca's *Quaestiones Naturales* re-emerges in the twelfth century (if not before), and Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* appears in Latin in the late thirteenth century. Given the late date of the translation of the bulk of Plato's works, his strictures against atheism in the *Laws* were unknown until the mid to late fifteenth century.[7]

But it was scripture that informed medieval views of atheism, and perhaps the most famous atheist of the medieval world is the fool of the Psalms, who

6 Translation from Power (1922, 296f.).

7 Marsilio Ficino published the first complete translation of Plato in 1484.

'says in his heart, "There is no God"'.[8] The exegesis of this verse from Psalms 13 and 52 has a long history dating back to the early Church. In this exegetical tradition the fool is considered as one of the following (see Logan [forthcoming]; cf. Dahan 1990):

- the denier of God's power or some other attribute and, implicitly, of God Himself;
- the morally culpable believer, who behaves and sins as if there is no God;
- the Jewish people who reject the divinity of Christ – '*Non est Deus*' can be translated as 'He is not God';
- the Gentiles who believe in false gods;
- the doxastic atheist, whether covert or not.

As far back as Augustine and the Church Fathers, a distinction is made between the kinds of unbelief in the two Psalms. Augustine views Psalm 13 as referring to 'profane and abominable philosophers, who hold perverse and false opinions about' God (Augustine 2000, 175). This fool is a covert doxastic atheist, who dares not deny God's existence out loud. However, in his exegesis of Psalm 52, Augustine treats this passage as referring not to the doxastic atheist, but to 'ill-living people' who 'believe in God, to the extent that they suppose what they do is acceptable to God', and in doing so can be understood to deny God, for:

> when you say, 'God looks favorably on my iniquities', you are saying nothing else but, *God does not exist.* (Augustine 2001, 33)

In his influential *Moralia in Job* (IV, XVIII, 2), Gregory the Great (*c.* 540–604) also distinguishes two types of unbelief arising out of adversity: (1) that of the fool of Psalms 13:1 and 52:1, which he associates with doxastic atheism; and (2) that of the sinners of Psalms 72:11 and 93:7, who believe God is unconcerned with human affairs (Gregory the Great 1845, 318).[9]

Anselm of Canterbury (*c.* 1033–1109) introduces the Psalmist's fool into his argument for God in chapter 2 of the *Proslogion* (*Proslogion*, 2).[10] The fool is a doxastic atheist, but it would be a mistake to view Anselm as involved in a debate with a doxastic atheist concerning God. He is meeting a different

8 See both Psalms 13:1 and 52:1 in the Vulgate edition of the Bible: '*Dixit insipiens in corde suo, "Non est Deus"*'.

9 This tradition continues into Anselm's time; see Rupert of Deutz (*c.* 1075/80–1129/30) in his *Commentary on Job*, identifying the rejector of Job 21 with the Psalmist's fool. (*Super Job Commentarius*, *Patrologia Latina*, 168:1053C-D: '*«Quis est,» inquiunt, «Omnipotens, ut serviamus illi?» subaudi nullus. «Dixit enim insipiens in corde suo: non est Deus.»*')

10 Translations of the *Proslogion* are taken from Logan 2009/2016.

challenge. As a man of reason *and* scripture, he is faced with the fact that scripture refers to the denial of divinity as foolish. It is that the fool can appear to deny God's existence meaningfully that interests Anselm. He wishes to show by rational argument what scripture means by calling the atheist a fool, and has no interest in supplying the fool with any supporting arguments for his unbelief. In the medieval period, those who objected to Anselm's proof, such as Thomas Aquinas (*ST* Ia 2, 1), still considered the conclusion, 'God exists', true. Anselm's contemporary, the anonymous author of the *Pro Insipiente (On behalf of the Fool)*, is not an atheist but a believing Catholic, who writes: 'I understand indubitably that that which is supreme, namely God, truly both exists and cannot not exist' (§7; Logan 2009/2016, 66).

Although not as famous as Anselm's *Proslogion*, the *De nesciente et sciente* of Ralph of Battle (*c.* 1040–1124) is perhaps equally important for our understanding of medieval 'atheism' (Ralph von Battle 2015, 242–491).[11] Ralph engages with the kind of doubt that existed, or at least was imaginable in medieval society. His protagonist, *nesciens*, begins from the perspective of a sceptical materialism – seeing is believing. His 'agnosticism' is of a very naive kind, as his interlocutor, *sciens*, establishes quite easily by providing examples of things *nesciens* believes but cannot see, feel, or hear. Ralph does not state that *nesciens* is an atheist,[12] and at no point does *nesciens* say, as Anselm's *insipiens* does, *Non est Deus*. *Nesciens* believes he has a creator, and that this creator is without a beginning, but he does not know whether there is sufficient reason for this belief; nor does he know who this creator is (§32). In the dialogue, it is the task of *sciens* to help him understand that it is God (§33). At one point in the discussion *nesciens* accuses *sciens* of suggesting that only a wise man can be human (§152). *Sciens* responds by distinguishing between the terms 'foolish' and 'irrational'. Definitionally, humans are rational, and the other animals are irrational. The difference is that such animals are not culpable for their irrational behaviour, since they are essentially irrational, but humans are, since their essence is rational. Foolishness is the contrary of wisdom and not reason (§160). One must be rational in order to be foolish. Foolishness is reason united to 'all the vices and bad works, just as wisdom, its contrary, unites with all that is rightly done and all the virtues' (*Nesciens* in §161). The connection of foolishness with heteropraxis is more important here than any doxastic atheism.

11 Translation into English is my own.

12 Although in his introduction to the dialogue Bernd Goebel talks of him as such (Ralph von Battle 2015, 28).

Nevertheless, as Gilbert Crispin shows in his *De altaris sacramento*, heterodox theists can also be regarded as atheists in some sense. Gilbert criticizes those who deny the conversion of bread and wine in the Mass. To deny that God, who created everything out of nothing, could not change something that already exists is to deny God's omnipotence. Denying God's power here is, in effect, to deny that God exists (Crispin 1986a, 129 [§34]; cf. A. S. Abulafia 1992, 141). There is an apparent link, then, between heresy and atheism for Gilbert.

Following Augustine, Hugh of Saint Victor (*c.* 1096–141) expresses what was perhaps the dominant trope of medieval anthropology: man is made in God's image and it is by means of this image that he has knowledge of God (Hugh of Saint Victor 1951, 58 [I, 3, 30]). To be precise, it is in his reason that man is God's image (Hugh of Saint Victor 1951, 43 [I, 3, 6]). Reason is the specific difference that determines man's essence. If there is no God there is no image and if there is no image there is no reason, and if there is no reason there is no man. Man and God are inextricably bound in this worldview in such a way that there can be no rejection of the latter without rejection of the former. On such an account, atheism is viewed as outside the realm of wisdom (i.e. the proper expression of the rational), and as associated with the realm of foolishness, in which rational men act as if they are irrational, when they do not give what is due to God, nor follow his precepts: 'Although these are called faithful by name, yet they are in fact and in truth far from the faith' (Hugh of Saint Victor 1951, 171 [I, 10, 4]). For Hugh, it is not 'the quantity of cognition', but 'the magnitude of devotion' that God cherishes. Here orthodoxical inadequacy is over-ridden by orthopraxis (Hugh of Saint Victor 1951, 174 [I, 10, 6]).

In the preliminary objections that precede his five ways in *ST* Ia, 2, 3, Thomas Aquinas (*c.* 1225–74) presents two arguments against the existence of God. The first objection is that if God is infinitely good, as he must be if he is God, then there could be no evil; but there is evil; therefore, there is no God. He answers this by quoting Augustine to the effect that God's goodness and omnipotence are so great that he can bring good out of evil, and this is why God's infinite goodness can coexist with evil (*ST* Ia 2, 3, ad 1). The second objection appeals to Aquinas' version of the principle of parsimony (*ST* Ia 2, 3, 2): 'it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many'. Since natural phenomena can be reduced to one principal, nature, and voluntary things to one principle, human reason or will, it seems that there is no need to postulate God. Aquinas answers this objection by appealing to the notion of God as the

first cause, which nature requires, since it possesses a determinate end which is directed by a higher agent. Furthermore, he argues, human reason and will, being changeable and defectible, require an unchangeable first principle, which possesses *per se* necessity – a point he claims to establish in his five ways (*ST* Ia 2, 3, ad 2). The lack of sustained treatment of arguments for atheism suggests that for Aquinas such arguments do not possess great weight. His failure to quote or to indicate who might have held such views again suggests that the existence of doxastic atheists is not a concern for him. What makes Aquinas' treatment of unbelief in the *Summa Theologiae* interesting is that, like Ralph of Battle, he treats it as a vice, the contrary of the virtue of faith. As such, the cause of unbelief is in the will rather than intellect, although it finds expression in the intellect (*ST* IIa:IIae 10, 2, ad 2). Aquinas does not include doxastic atheism in his account of unbelief (*ST* IIa:IIae 10, 5, *resp*.), but argues that it is impossible for anyone with a false opinion concerning God to know him at all, since the object of such an opinion is not God [*non est Deus*] (*ST* IIa:IIae 10, 3, *resp*.), bringing us back indirectly to the Psalmist's fool.

Of course, many people did possess what Aquinas would have regarded as a false idea of God: perhaps as the result of the failure of God to answer their prayers, which might be taken to mean that God was indifferent to them, rejected them, or was not omnipotent. Otloh of Saint Emmeram (*c.* 1010 to *c.* 1070), in his account of his 'diabolical delusions' (Otloh 1998, 164), documents such an experience arising in part from the fact that God did not appear to answer his prayers:

> [A]lthough I never lost my faith . . . I felt tormented for a long period of time by doubts concerning . . . even the very essence *(essentia)* of God Himself . . . I was surrounded by every doubt and blindness of mind, so that I was unsure whether there was any truth whatsoever in Sacred Scripture, and whether God was in fact omnipotent. (Otloh 1998, 163)

Identifying Atheists

William of Ockham (*c.* 1287–1347) indicates that he is aware of those who deny God. He writes that 'many doubt that God exists and whether it is possible that God exists' (William of Ockham 1970, 313 [d. II, q. IX]).[13] Pluta interprets Ockham as stating 'that many people of his time doubted the

13 My translation. See also William of Ockham (1980, 2 [I, q. 1, a. 2, conc. 1]).

actuality and possibility of God's existence' (Pluta 2011, 120). But Ockham does not say of whom he is speaking, and his use may be that of the historical present, referring to ancient sources and the scriptures. The case for the presence of doxastic atheism requires the identification of particular individuals and groups of individuals who can be recognized as atheists.

One case sometimes cited as evidence is that of Simon of Tournai (*c.* 1130 to *c.* 1201). According to Cantimpré (*Book of Bees*, II, 48, 5), Simon was a doctor at the University of Paris, who was alleged to have blasphemed against Christ and to have blamed him along with Moses and Mohammed for making people mad. The stories about Simon are based on second-hand, or better, third-hand accounts.[14] In fact, there is no suggestion of unbelief on his part in his extant writings.

In the early fourteenth century, Jacques Fournier (*c.* 1280/5–1342), Bishop of Pamiers, undertook a series of hearings into heresy in his diocese, the detailed records of which are contained in a manuscript in the Vatican Library (Ms Vat Lat 4030). Here we encounter the case of Aude Fauré, a married woman living in the village of Merviel. The various depositions taken from her reveal the object of her doubt, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. There is some ambiguity in the accounts, which helps to explain the later suggestion that Aude was an atheist. Le Roy Ladurie considers her a 'neurotic' who disbelieves in the real presence (Le Roy Ladurie 1990, 26), while Dronke refers to her atheism (Dronke 1984, 214), believing that others have not noted that Aude's disbelief concerns the existence of God as well (see Dronke 1984, 317 n. 33; see also Reynolds 1991, 33 n. 44). It is certainly the case that in her account of an earlier conversation Aude is recorded as having asked how it could be possible for her not to believe (in) God.[15] But is she an atheist? If she is, then oddly this does not seem to be a concern of those around her, whether family, acquaintances, or inquisitors. Their concern is her belief in the real presence and whether she has been influenced by Waldensian or Albigensian heretics. At the beginning of her interrogation she states that she has always believed that there is an omnipotent God in heaven, but not that this God was present in the sacrament of the altar (Ms Vat Lat 4030, f. 133^{ra}). Bishop Fournier does not consider her

14 See, for example, Gerald of Wales (1979, 114f. [Distinction I, Chapter 51]) and Matthew Paris (1872, 476f.).

15 Ms Vat Lat 4030, f. 133^{va}: *'quomodo potest esse quod non possum credere deum'*. See also f. 133^{rb}: *'quomodo potest esse hoc quod non possum credere dominum nostrum'*. Note the ambiguity here, which is compounded by the fact that this is a Latin translation of what Aude said in her Languedocien dialect.

words as those of an atheist, as his judgement at the end of the proceedings shows. He finds Aude guilty of denying the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and absolves her, subjecting her to a series of penances (Ms Vat Lat 4030, f. 138^{rb}). He makes no mention of Aude's supposed 'atheism'.

In 1516, at the end of our period, in Cuenca (in Spain), we find the sacristan Juan Gutierrez being questioned by the Inquisition for denying the existence of God. However, he explains to the inquisitors that his words, '*Dios no es nada*', are not to be taken literally, since God's existence is not a matter of faith, but is a fundamental truth established by philosophy: 'for even Jews and Moors believe in God, and furthermore everyone knows that there must be a first cause' (quoted in Flynn 1995, 41f.; see also Schwerhoff 2008, 398–408). He argues that his words represented a loss of reason resulting from extreme emotion. Here, the 'atheist' is someone who considers that belief in God is axiomatic, and that his expression of unbelief results from some kind of aberration in his reason. These examples show how careful we must be in imputing doxastic atheism to medieval expressions of doubt or blasphemy, or to accusations of atheism as in the case of Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250), who in spite of the polemics against him was a believing Catholic seeking to enforce the Catholic faith in his *Constitutions of Melfi*, promulgated in 1231 (see D. Abulafia 1992, 369). Susan Reynolds takes the polemic of diplomacy for evidence of unbelief, suggesting that the English King Henry II (1133–89) might have been a sceptic (Reynolds 1991, 36f.): 'his warning to the pope that he would rather become a Moslem (*Noradini citius sequeretur errores et profanae religionis iniret consortium*) than have Thomas Becket as archbishop of Canterbury any longer . . . suggests that he took his Christianity in a rather detached and carefree way'. In fact, the quotation indicates that Henry regarded Islam as in error, and that he was expressing the depth of his hostility to the person of Becket, rather than indicating a latent rejection of their shared Catholic faith.

The legend of Siger of Brabant (*c.* 1240 to *c.* 1281/4) as a concealed atheist operating within the University of Paris in the thirteenth century has had traction until recently, in spite of the place given to him in Paradise by Dante (Dante, *Paradise*, X). However, recent scholarship has provided a more accurate account of Siger as a philosopher within the Faculty of Arts, who sought to interpret Aristotle correctly. In his *Impossibilia*, Siger presents six impossible or absurd propositions, including a rejection of the principle of non-contradiction. He gives arguments for these propositions, before refuting them and their supporting arguments. The first of the *Impossibilia* is the proposition '*Quod deus non sit*', which is the prime impossibility since its opposite is the prime necessity (Siger of Brabant 1974, 67). According to Siger,

God is the uncaused cause which cannot not exist (Siger of Brabant 1974, 69). It is perhaps this prevalent conviction, that the rejection of a necessary uncaused cause would render the universe and everything in it contingent and unable to have come into existence, that helps to explain the cultural failure of doxastic atheism in the medieval world.

In 1277, Bishop Stephen Tempier of Paris issued a wide-ranging condemnation of propositions taught in the Arts Faculty, which he held were inconsistent with the revealed doctrines of the Christian faith. We have a clue as to the intended targets from the letter that Tempier wrote to accompany the condemnations, in which he points to exponents of a doctrine of double truth of scripture and philosophy (Tempier 1973, 584). One of the likeliest candidates for this possibly unfair accusation is Siger, who sought to follow philosophical argument without seeking to reconcile it with theological doctrine, not because he wished to replace or undermine theological doctrine, but because philosophy was an autonomous discipline. In his *De aeternitate mundi*, Siger puts forward the arguments of the philosophers against the creation in time of the universe, concluding: 'We say these things as the opinion of the Philosopher, although not asserting them as true' (Siger of Brabant 1964, 93).[16]

Siger was one of a growing number of members of the Arts Faculty who did not proceed to one of the higher faculties. In the fourteenth century, John Buridan (*c.* 1300–1358/60) chose to remain in the Arts Faculty for philosophical reasons. Buridan personifies the change that is taking place in medieval academic and intellectual society, in which philosophy and theology had operated in tandem under the leadership of the theologians. The interest in addressing questions from a purely philosophical perspective in which articles of faith are methodologically excluded is gaining ground and will lead eventually to the secularization of philosophy,[17] and in doing so weaken the dominant anthropological trope of the *imago dei*, in which atheism is seen simply as an absurdity.

Diagnosing Atheism

Perhaps the most important insight in an investigation of atheism in the medieval world is the fact that it was regarded as absurd, as a failure of

16 Cf. Proposition 189: 'That creation is not possible, even though the contrary must be held according to the faith' (Tempier 1973, 591). Note that Aquinas considers the eternity of the world and its creation by God as philosophically consistent (Thomas Aquinas 1964, 19).

17 On Buridan's role in this, see Zupko (2003, 274).

rationality, arising from foolishness, illness, madness, demonic influence, despair, etc. In philosophy, the arguments or assertions of atheism were simply presented as part of the preamble to the proof of God. It seems that the principles that 'nothing can come from nothing' and that 'everything (apart from the uncaused first cause) must have a cause' possessed a power that rendered atheism apparently obtuse.[18] The difficulties in rendering God's attributes consistent with each other, which today seem insurmountable to many, were seen as arising from the fact that God's essence and existence are beyond man's comprehension, so that, as Augustine said, if you can understand God, it is not God you have understood (Augustine, *Sermo* 117, 5; cf. Augustine, *Sermo* 52, 6).

For Anselm, it is entailed in his premise that God is 'that than which nothing greater can be thought' (*Proslogion*, 2), that he is greater than can be thought:

> Therefore, Lord, not only are You [something] than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something greater than can be thought.
>
> (*Prosologion*, 15)[19]

This notion was taken up by Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64), who interpreted it apophatically to mean, unlike Anselm, that nothing we could say about God could be really true (*Sermo*, XX; Hopkins 2006, 58). Here, the failure of believers to understand what their God is was not regarded as a failure of their belief or their conception, but as confirmation of it. Thomas Aquinas, like Nicholas of Cusa, can legitimately be classified as a proponent of apophatic theology. He writes that 'we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not' (*ST* Ia 3, proemium).[20] The fact that the archetypal theistic philosopher can make such a statement should make us beware of attempts to identify the apophatism of thinkers such as Eriugena[21] (*c.* 800–77) and Meister Eckhart[22] (*c.* 1260 to *c.* 1328) as some kind of crypto- or proto-atheism.

18 For a clear account of what is meant by the notion of the uncaused cause of *esse*, see Davies (2013).

19 Cf. Hugh of Saint Victor: 'What God is cannot be thought, even if it can be believed that He is, nor can it be comprehended of what nature He is' (Hugh of Saint Victor 1951, 166f. [I, 10, 2]).

20 See Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, I, [66]: God 'is more truly and faithfully spoken of negatively than affirmatively in all respects' (John the Scot 2011, 88).

21 In the *Periphyseon*, I [1], Eriugena places God under the *differentia*, 'That which is not'. But this is an expression of God's '*superessentia*' and not of non-*essentia*. God is 'nature which creates and is not created' (John the Scot 2011, 2).

22 The Bull of Pope John XII, *In agro dominico*, condemns 28 propositions allegedly found in Eckhart, including the eternity of the world (Denzinger 2010, §952).

The arguments about the eternity of the world were intra-Christian. However, Aristotelianism provided a way of reading the universe that could operate as an alternative to that of the scriptures and tradition; hence the conflicts in the University of Paris in the 1270s, which were associated with the creation or reinforcement of demarcation lines between philosophy and theology, along the boundary between the Arts and Theology Faculties. In this the philosophy of the Arts Faculty became a distinct type of philosophy, more nominalistic and naturalistic, and relatively free of Augustinian theologizing. But even in this context atheism failed to seed, let alone flourish.

Characteristics that may seem to us redolent of doxastic atheism (e.g. blasphemy, scoffing, anger at God and the Church) are, in the medieval world, to be found among believers.[23] As J. Huizinga points out, blasphemy 'arises from strong faith . . . Only the feeling of truly challenging heaven gives blasphemy its sinful attraction' (Huizinga 1996, 187).[24] We saw above how taverns and inns were places where expressions of blasphemy and disbelief could be found. In addition to this, in the gambling den cursing God and those who have his ear (the Virgin and the saints) was a common reaction to the losses experienced in playing dice or games of chance.

There is a clear correlation in the medieval mind between dice playing and blaspheming, as one can see, for example, in Emperor Frederick II's decrees of Messina (1221), which identify dice players as blasphemers (Ryccardi de Sancto Germano 1866, 341). In the *Parson's Tale*,[25] Geoffrey Chaucer (*c.* 1343–1400) connects gambling with anger and avarice, which end with the gambler despising and renouncing God.[26] The gambler does not deny God, but is angry with God because God is ultimately responsible for good or bad fortune in gambling (*Book of Bees*, II, 49, 11). On the slippery slope of sin, he ends up not in atheism, but as one who has lost hope of God's mercy. The sinner becomes convinced that he has committed the unforgiveable sin that God will not forgive. The extent to which the despairing gambler or the insouciant scoffer, such as Boccaccio's Ser Ceparello, are purely literary creations or whether they are meant to represent (types of) real people is difficult to say. But, whatever the case, when they appear, they do not exhibit doxastic atheism. As Alexander Murray points out: 'To write down even the

23 See the example of Thonis von Wesseling in Cologne in the late fifteenth century in Schwerhoff (2004).

24 *Pace* Pluta (2011, 119f. n. 5).

25 The *Parson's Tale* is a handbook of penance, based on Raymond of Peñafort's *Summa de Poenitentia* and William Peraldus's *Summa Vitiorum*.

26 His discussion of gamblers introduces his 'unusually long disquisition about the evils of swearing [i.e. blaspheming]' (Winstead 2009, 240).

most inveterate neglecter of God as an atheist is to slight the subtleties of religious psychology' (Murray 1972, 97).

When expressions of belief bordering on unbelief are found among the devout, we should not be too quick to jump to seeing evidence of doxastic atheism. In *Ms British Library Cotton Galba E.IV*, a 'memorandum book' of Prior Henry Eastry (1285–1331), we find a form of confession possibly used by the Benedictine community at Christ Church Priory, Canterbury (Cornett 2011, 125). The author of the document 'goes to great lengths in describing concrete social contexts for so many of the species of sin' (Cornett 2011, 127). In the final section dealing with sins of omission and negligence, doubting is linked to despair concerning God, not as unbelief, but because of the magnitude of sins, which are too great to be forgiven (Cornett 2011, 149). In another form of confession intended for lay people, doubt concerning the judgement day follows not from a doubt about God's existence, but from the fear that one's sins are too great to be forgiven (Cornett 2011, 185). This path to despair and even suicide neither arises from, nor leads to, disbelief in God, as we saw in the example given by Caesarius of Heisterbach. Despair here is not associated with unbelief, but with a pathological fear induced by belief in the doctrines of hell and damnation and in God's all-seeing eye:

> We should also think that God sees and knows all our thoughts and all our deeds, so nothing may be hidden from him. (Chaucer 2011, 480)

Once the motivation for persevering in the practice of a belief system is gone, then we might expect a natural progression to indifference to that belief system and eventually a loss of commitment to and/or rejection of that system. But that is not what we find in the medieval accounts themselves, either because such a progression did not take place, or because medieval authors chose not to recount such episodes.

There is an important aspect of medieval anthropology that I have already adverted to: that man is made in the image of God, and that this image is associated with the essential characteristic of reason. Based as it is on the *Genesis* creation story, the *locus classicus* of this account is found in Augustine's *De Trinitate* XIV, 12, 15 (Augustine 1991, 384, amended translation):

> This trinity of the mind is not therefore the image of God because the mind remembers and understands and loves itself, but because it is also able to remember and understand and love him by whom it was made. And when it does this it becomes wise. If it does not do it, then even though it remembers and understands and loves itself, it is foolish. Let it then remember its God to whose image it was made, and understand and love him.

In his *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 106, 4, Augustine states that God 'cannot be altogether and utterly hidden from any rational creature, so long as it makes use of its reason' (Augustine 1956, 685). There is a universal assent to God that only those 'suffering from great blindness of heart and sunk very deep in the darkness of ignorance' (Augustine 1991, 379 [XIV, 7, 9]) are unable to experience.

Conclusion

There is no evidence that medieval society considered there to be a problem with doxastic atheism *per se*. Doxastic atheism did not appear as a serious option in this society, although the existence of atheists, and therefore the possibility of there being atheists, was known from accounts of the ancient world. Such atheism did not have a voice in the medieval world, and did not generate any concerted action by religious or secular authorities. That doxastic atheists were neither heard nor spoken of may suggest that medieval society was not in a position to 'hear' or 'see' atheism as a living option. Occurrences of non-doxastic atheism are found in situations of despair, mental illness, and conditions associated with what the medievals considered to be demonic possession.

The *imago dei*, which in spite of the fall had not been destroyed, was regarded as constitutive of what it means to be human. The term 'rational' played a central role in this medieval anthropology as the specific difference that distinguishes human beings from all other animals. It is in their reason that each and every human being is the image of God. In a world where man is made in God's image, it would make no more sense to deny God *rationally* than to deny the existence of man.

The existence of God is taken as axiomatic. However, as attempts to prove God's existence become part of the philosophical-theological mainstream, the notion of God as an axiomatic first principle is weakened. For Aristotelian first principles cannot be demonstrated (Aristotle 1993, 4f. [72b5-23]). If you can demonstrate it, then it is not a first principle, and that means it is open to (philosophical) debate. However, by the time the works of Aristotle (and associated commentators) were rediscovered in the Latin west, there already existed a developed and increasingly sophisticated philosophical and theological account of God and the world, which was able to accommodate, if only temporarily and with some difficulty, the new information, rather than be overturned by it.

For the medieval world, atheism in the doxastic sense was an element of a defunct set of beliefs associated with the ancient world. Medieval

philosophers and theologians engaged with this defunct atheism, but it did not have any systematic exponents we are aware of. There was no existential requirement to engage with atheism, as there was in the case of luke-warm Catholics, heretics, Jews, Muslims, and pagans. That is not to say that there was not a pastoral concern to deal with the doubts and misunderstandings expressed by ordinary members of this Christian world. But our modern conception of atheism is not a piece missing from the jigsaw puzzle of medieval doxasticism; rather, it is a piece from a different puzzle.

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9

The Islamic World[1]

ILKKA LINDSTEDT

Introduction

This chapter surveys phenomena and trajectories related to atheism, doubt, and freethought in the medieval Islamic world. Since the existence of God was thought to be rationally proven by both Muslim philosophers and theologians alike, there were next to no Muslims that came to espouse atheism in the Middle Ages. However, there were a number of authors and scholars – some of them highly influential – who can be called freethinkers, though no such term existed in the Arabic or Persian of the time. Similar to their seventeenth-century European counterparts, the medieval Muslim freethinkers held that arguments and positions about truths should be based on reason and demonstrative argumentation rather than revelation and tradition. Some of them directed venomous criticism against prophecy and the Quran, which they all but rejected. Perhaps surprisingly, many of the works (or citations of them) of the medieval Muslim critics of religion have survived to this day.

Background: The Quran

The Quran consists of revelations to the Prophet Muhammad (d. AD 632). Though the revelations were collected in one book only some time after the death of the Prophet, most modern scholars agree that there are few post-Muhammadan interpolations in the Quran (Donner 1998, 35–63). The Quran includes ample censure of 'disbelievers' (*kuffār*), that is, people that the Quran accuses of *kufr*, not believing in God, His revelations and prophets, and the

1 I am extremely grateful to Mulki Al-Sharmani and Kaj Öhrnberg for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this chapter. I also thank Janne Mattila for discussing and elucidating some important concepts and ideas of Islamic philosophy to me. Any errors or misunderstandings remain my own.

afterlife. The word *kuffār* is a catch-all term, grouping together a wide array of different people that would have self-identified in diverse ways. Among them would have been individuals and groups that believed in many different deities, as well as monotheists. It is unclear whether any atheists, properly speaking, would have been living in Arabia on the eve of Islam. The Quranic category of disbelievers also includes some Jews and Christians (often called 'the People of the Book'), though the Quran incorporates others among them as believers and promises them soteriological reward (for the Quranic categorizations of the believers, see Donner 2002–3; Lamptey 2014; Sirry 2014). For example, verse 3:199 reads: 'Some of the People of the Book believe in God, in what has been sent down to you and in what was sent down to them: humbling themselves before God, they would never sell God's revelation for a small price. These people will have their rewards with their Lord: God is swift in reckoning' (Abdel Haleem 2004).

A significant and famous verse in the Quran is 45:24: 'They [the disbelievers] say, "There is only our life in this world: we die, we live, nothing but time (*al-dahr*) destroys us."' Here, the Quran presents some of the *kuffār* as specifically rejecting the hereafter. Only time (*al-dahr*) produces generation and degeneration. The Quran, naturally, rejects this view, emphasizing that 'it is God who gives you life, then causes you to die, and then He gathers you all to the Day of Resurrection of which there is no doubt, though most people do not comprehend' (45:26). Interestingly, in later Islamic literature, a group of people called the *dahriyya* (sing. *dahrī*) emerges. The appellation derives from the Quranic verse quoted above: it is probable that no one ever called her- or himself *dahrī*; it is a label given by 'orthodox' Muslim scholars. These *dahriyya* are depicted as people who denounce the afterlife but also, remarkably, God, since He cannot be observed with the senses (Daiber 1999, 39–44). They could, hence, be called atheists from a modern perspective. However, it is once again hard to say whether or not we are dealing with a real or merely imagined group. The sources are not very forthcoming in identifying anyone as *dahrī* other than for polemical purposes. What is more, an array of opinions about God are ascribed to the *dahriyya*. For example, some sources say that the *dahriyya* professed what could be called 'Gnostic' views about the creator: since the world is full of evil, the creator could not have been wise and benevolent, the *dahriyya* reasoned. The universe was created by a sort of Demiurge, an evil creator, who is not equivalent with God, as the Muslim scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) reports their views (Ibn Ḥazm 1996, III, 138).

Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, the Quran does not ordain the death penalty to those leaving the faith. This became the standard penalty for

apostates in later centuries when Islamic schools of law developed. However, there has been a wide array of opinions among Muslim jurists concerning apostates in the medieval and modern periods (Saeed and Saeed 2004). The same punishment, death, became prevalent as a majority opinion for insulting the Prophet Muhammad (Daga Portillo 2017). Interestingly, these punishments seem to have been rarely carried out in the Middle Ages according to the surviving evidence.

Freethought in the context of the development of Islamic theology and philosophy starts to develop in the eighth century AD (for studies on early Islamic theology and thought, see van Ess 1991–5; Winter 2008; Scmidtke 2016). The detailed contours of these discourses and arguments are outside the scope of this contribution, but the issues debated included, for example, the nature of God, the creation, and revelation. The formation of 'orthodoxy' was still underway and different opinions were put forward. Because of this, scholars who espoused positions that were not and did not become mainstream were not afraid to voice their views.

In this connection, we should note two developments and phenomena in early Islamic theology and philosophy: first, the rationalistic school of theology, called the Muʿtazila, flourished in Iraq, especially in the eighth and ninth centuries AD; and second, around the same time a great number of Greek philosophical works were translated into Arabic (Gutas 1998). Hence, there was a strong rationalistic underpinning in much of Islamic thought at the time. Ibn al-Rāwandī (fl. ninth century AD), discussed below, associated at the beginning of his career with the Muʿtazila, although he then started to write against them. It is important to note that the Greek tradition was not simply adopted, but the Muslim philosophers significantly advanced philosophical and scientific knowledge.

Despite the fact that there was a number of rationalist and freethinking Muslim scholars in the Middle Ages, even those who were most critical of religion can scarcely be called atheists. This is because, following the ancient and late ancient philosophy, Muslim philosophers and other scholars deemed God's existence to be rationally proven. This is often known as the argument from first cause. It was originally Aristotle who theorized that behind the motion of the things of the universe is the 'unmoved mover' or 'prime mover'. This is necessary, in Aristotle's opinion, to avert an infinite regress (a series of never-ending causalities). Late antique philosophers and theologians, and later Muslim ones, identified this prime mover with God. Later, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037) presented a new, ontological, argument for the existence of God, which was highly influential in Islamic philosophy after

him. This argument states that God is a 'necessary existent' that gives other beings their existence. Contrary to the argument from first cause, which concentrated on movement, Ibn Sīnā's argument does not require anything empirically observable as its basis. It is metaphysical rather than physical. Whichever argument they employed, all Muslim philosophers agreed that the existence of God is rationally proven, though their conceptions of God might have differed from those of the religious scholars.

The freethinkers presented in this chapter were often referred to with pejorative terms in Arabic literature. The word *dahrī* was mentioned in the previous section. Other terms include *zindīq* and *mulḥid*. The word *zindīq* was in particular used to denote a Manichean person, but other 'heretics' were also so called. The word *mulḥid* simply means 'heretic; deviant', and is used indiscriminately for people who the author in question considered beyond the pale.

Ibn al-Rāwandī

The ninth-century Ibn al-Rāwandī is an exceptional figure in medieval history. His literary attacks against Islam in particular and religion in general are remarkable in their comprehensiveness. Ibn al-Rāwandī's name is variously given in the sources. Though Ibn al-Rāwandī is the most common form (and will be used here), Ibn al-Rīwandī and Ibn al-Rawandī also appear. His full name was Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq al-Rāwandī (Ibn al-Nadīm 1890, 223). He hailed from the area of Khurāsān, more specifically from near the town of Marw al-Rūdh, though he apparently lived most of his life in Baghdad. According to the testimony of Ibn al-Nadīm (d. *c.* AD 990), Ibn al-Rāwandī was a very clever scholar, and at the beginning of his career he was completely 'orthodox'. Then something happened and he became a maverick. Ibn al-Nadīm (1890, 223) credits this heterodoxic turn to a Jewish figure called Abū ʿĪsā ibn Lāwī. This is a common narrative motif and social psychological phenomenon in which threats to a group from within are assigned to the 'others'. Some sources state that his father was Jewish (Ibn al-Jawzī 2010, VII, 415; al-Aʿsam 2010, 153), which might be a continuation of this motif. Ibn al-Nadīm (1890, 223) claims that Ibn al-Rāwandī showed remorse towards the end of his life for his non-conformist views and deeds (again a common literary motif).

Though we can place him somewhere in the ninth century AD, there is no certainty about when he lived exactly. One of the first to furnish a death date, al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), says that Ibn al-Rāwandī breathed his last in AD 859

(al-Masʿūdī 1966–79, V, 23; al-Aʿsam 2010, 74). However, other sources state that he died much later, in AD 910 (Ibn al-Jawzī 2010, VII, 415; al-Aʿsam 2010, 153). Whatever his exact date of demise, there is no evidence that Ibn al-Rāwandī met a violent death or suffered any serious persecution during his life for his views. Later writers sometimes voice astonishment about this fact. One medieval Muslim scholar notes that Ibn al-Rāwandī should have been killed since he attacked the Quran and prophecy (Ibn al-Jawzī 2010, VII, 416).

Some of the descriptions and accounts about Ibn al-Rāwandī in medieval Arabic literature are contradictory. Since he was perceived by many to be an arch-heretic, all sorts of value judgements about him were passed by different scholars. However, it appears that the quotations from his works (all now lost) are in most instances genuine, though sometimes authors paraphrase him rather than quote him verbatim. There are enough independent citations to prove their overall authenticity. In any case, the fact that Ibn al-Rāwandī's works only survive in quotations makes it difficult to reconstruct and trace his thinking and its development (see, e.g. Kraus 1934; van Ess 1991–5, IV, 295–349; de Smet 1995; Urvoy 1996; Stroumsa 1999).

What renders the task even more challenging is that (1) Ibn al-Rāwandī attributed some of his own ideas to other (existing) people, though they are unlikely to have professed them (Stroumsa 1999, 40–6, 65–71); (2) astonishingly, he wrote refutations of his own works (Stroumsa 1999, 72–4); and (3) he also composed books in which he put forward orthodox Islamic views. The latter is the case of the *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, 'The Book of God's Oneness', attributed to him. According to the Muʿtazilī author al-Khayyāṭ (d. AD 912), Ibn al-Rāwandī wrote the *Kitāb al-Tawhīd* when he felt his life to be in danger, endeavouring to make him look pious and orthodox in the eyes of Islamic scholars (al-Aʿsam 2010, 20–1). Al-Khayyāṭ also notes that it is possible that Ibn al-Rāwandī put some of his provocative notions forward without actually believing in them (al-Aʿsam 2010, 24).

To the extent that they can be reconstructed, his anti-religious views have to do with, in particular, three themes: (1) belittling the role of God as the creator; (2) asking audacious questions about theodicy; and (3) disputing the importance of prophecy and revelation. I will discuss these themes in this order with some references to and quotations from his works.

According to the sources, Ibn al-Rāwandī wrote a book called *Kitāb al-Tāj*, 'The Book of Crown', where he opined that the creation is eternal (al-Aʿsam 2010, 19). This is nothing astonishing: most Muslim philosophers were of the opinion that the world is eternal. In this they followed Aristotle. Moreover, many philosophers can be said to have reduced God the creator to a rather

abstract notion: the universe naturally emanates from Him eternally, but He was not the creator in an active sense. More strikingly, however, in the *Kitāb al-Tāj*, Ibn al-Rāwandī stated that the universe does not have a 'maker, originator, or creator' at all (*lā ṣāniʿ lahu wa-lā muḥdith wa-lā khāliq*). However, in other quotations attributed to Ibn al-Rāwandī, he accepts God as the creator of the universe, adding, however, that He created *bi-ṭibāʿihi*, 'according to His disposition' (al-Aʿsam 2010, 149). This would seem to mean that God functioned as the creator not because He wanted to, but because He was disposed to.

Elsewhere, in a book called *Kitāb al-Qaḍīb al-Dhahab*, 'The Book of the Golden Wand', Ibn al-Rāwandī is supposed to have put forward the idea that God's knowledge of things was created by God himself at some point in time. There was a moment when God was without knowledge (Ibn al-Nadīm 1890, 224). However, surviving references to this work and its contents are few and far between, so it is difficult to understand the crux of the argument that Ibn al-Rāwandī was presenting. Furthermore, like (other) Muʿtazilī scholars, Ibn al-Rāwandī professed that the Quran was created in time. A work called *Kitāb Khalq al-Qurʾān*, 'The Creation of the Quran', is attributed to him (Ibn al-Nadīm 1870, 38).

In another work, the *Kitāb al-Taʿdīl wa-l-Tajwīr*, 'The Book of Assessing the Just and the Tyrannical', Ibn al-Rāwandī engaged with the question of theodicy, which was a common theme in his works. On the basis of the surviving descriptions of the *Kitāb al-Taʿdīl wa-l-Tajwīr*, Ibn al-Rāwandī argued that a deity that makes people sick and poor, or that tests people with tribulations, is not wise. Moreover, he noted that he can only call 'stupid' (*safīh*) a deity that retaliates against someone who has disbelieved or sinned with eternal punishment. Such a retribution would be, in Ibn al-Rāwandī's opinion, disproportionate (al-Aʿsam 2010, 19; Lindstedt 2011, 149). In addition to disparaging the Quranic notions of hell, he also mocked the depictions of paradise in the Islamic scripture (Ibn al-Jawzī 2010, VII, 420; al-Aʿsam 2010, 163). All in all, we can say that he engaged with specific instances of Quranic passages detailing the heavenly reward as corporeal and infernal punishment as being an everlasting timespan (Lindstedt 2011, 149–51).

By and large, Muslim philosophers argued that, since only the rational soul in humans is eternal, corporeal resurrection is improbable or impossible. The latter (that it is impossible) became the mainstream view in Muslim philosophy: in death, the rational soul rises to the level of the active intellect or returns to God, who is pure reason (*ʿaql*). Those (the masses) whose rational soul was non-existent simply disappeared without the possibility for afterlife. For the philosophers, the corporeal resurrection and

afterlife of the Quran and other religious texts are only allegories. Not surprisingly, then, the Muslim freethinkers and critics of religion, who were much inspired by philosophy, disapproved or parodied the Islamic dogmas of resurrection hereafter. However, some philosophers, such as Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), gave more significance to the afterlife depictions of the Quran and other religious texts, putting forward the idea that the souls whose rational faculty has not been perfected imagine the corporeal rewards or punishments that they expected to receive. But even in Ibn Sīnā's conception, corporeal afterlife does not exist in reality but only in the imagination of the souls of the masses (Michot 1987).

Ibn al-Rāwandī also criticized the importance of prophecy in general and the Quran as revelation in particular. The famous and important Sunnī theologian al-Ashʿarī (d. 936) reports that Ibn al-Rāwandī described the Quran as including only some of the meanings of the universe (*al-Qurʾān maʿnā min al-maʿānī*; al-Ashʿarī 1929, II, 589; al-Aʿsam 2010, 53). In this point of view, the Quran might hold some truths, but its importance is particularized. Moreover, Ibn al-Rāwandī said that the Quran is not in fact aesthetically beautiful, suggesting that Arabic poets have composed more pleasing verses than the verses of the Quran (Ibn al-Jawzī 2010, VII, 416; al-Aʿsam 2010, 155). And, in any case, the Quran is only pleasing to people who understand Arabic: how would the non-Arabs be convinced by it, Ibn al-Rāwandī asks (Lindstedt 2011, 145).

Ibn al-Rāwandī suggested that there were inconsistencies in the Quran (al-Māturīdī 1970, 199; al-Aʿsam 2010, 70). Quite a few of Ibn al-Rāwandī's statements concerning this matter have been preserved, since later scholars wanted to refute them. Most of them stem from his work *Kitāb al-Dāmigh*, 'The Brain-Basher', in which he aimed to dispute the Quran (for the quotations from this work, see Ritter 1931). One of the passages from the *Kitāb al-Dāmigh* is the following:

> He [Ibn al-Rāwandī] has said: 'Who is unable to count to six? He [God] talks about six [days] in total [when discussing the duration of the creation, Quran 7:54] but when it comes to dividing it to parts, we see that He makes a mistake by two, for He says: *He created the earth in two days* [Q. 41:9], then He says: *He measured therein all things to give them nourishment in due proportion, in four days* [Q 41:10], and [finally] He says: *He completed the skies as seven firmaments in two days* [Q. 41:12].'
>
> (Ritter 1931, 6; transl. adapted from Lindstedt 2011, 141)

Here, Ibn al-Rāwandī argues that Quran 7:54 and 41:9–12 are in disagreement: while the former talks of the process of the creation as lasting six days, the

latter, if counted together, seems to suggest eight days instead. Muslim exegetes of the Quran usually explained that the four days mentioned in the verse 41:10 actually contain the two days mentioned in 41:9. Thus, six days referred to in Quran 7:54 would be the sum of the days in verses 41:9–12 as well. However, this exegetical device does not seem to have satisfied Ibn al-Rāwandī.

Ibn al-Rāwandī's critics noted, however, that in his attacks against the Quran he often – perhaps purposefully – misunderstood Quranic vocabulary and concepts and resorted to special pleading. Ibn al-Jawzī (2010, VII, 420–1; see also al-Aʿsam 2010, 164) remarks that Ibn al-Rāwandī overlooks the fact that words of Quranic Arabic have different meanings in different contexts; hence, Ibn al-Rāwandī's argumentation is often tortuous and forced.

In addition to presenting what Ibn al-Rāwandī deemed as discrepancies in the Quran, he disputed the value of prophecy and revelation. His *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, 'The Book of the Emerald', was devoted to this task (on the work, see the collection of quotations by Kraus (1934) and analysis by Stroumsa (1999, 46–86)). In the book, Ibn al-Rāwandī notes that people have been able to advance, for example, science and music without resorting to what revelations offer. Reason triumphs over religion and tradition (Lindstedt 2011, 147). The fixation with the issue of prophecy might be surprising to modern readers, but it must be understood in its cultural context. As Sarah Stroumsa (1999, 136) notes, 'the preoccupation of Muslim freethinkers with prophecy seems to reflect their own religious background'. Since prophecy is a predominant tenet in Islam, it was natural for freethinkers to rebuff just that. Al-Khayyāṭ, Ibn al-Rāwandī's (near-)contemporary, characterizes the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* as follows:

> Among his books is the one called *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, in which he [Ibn al-Rāwandī] mentions the miraculous signs of the prophets, peace upon them, such as the signs of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, God bless them. He disputed the reality of these miraculous signs and claimed that they were fraudulent tricks (*makhārīq*) and that people who performed them were magicians and liars, that the Quran is the speech of an unwise being, and that it contains contradictions, errors and absurdities. He included in it a chapter entitled: 'Against the Muhammadans in particular', meaning the community of Muhammad, God bless him.
>
> (al-Khayyāṭ 1957, 12; transl. adapted from Stroumsa 1999, 47)

The arguments against prophecy and prophets are rather all-encompassing and often rather harsh (Lindstedt 2011, 141–3). In one of the surviving

quotations from the *Kitāb al-Zumurrud*, Ibn al-Rāwandī asserts that the prophets are deceivers and that their miracles are actually sleights of hand:

> There are various types of legerdemain (*makhārīq*). Among them are those that are difficult to interpret because of their subtlety [but they are still only tricks, not actual miracles]. Since the accounts of them are transmitted by a small group [of early Muslims], it is possible that they agreed on a lie.
>
> (Kraus 1934, 101)

According to Ibn al-Rāwandī, then, traditions about the miracles of the prophets are highly questionable, since only a small number of people have claimed to have witnessed them. Furthermore, it is possible that the prophets simply used magical tricks to conduct these so-called miracles.

In this work, Ibn al-Rāwandī also took issue with the rituals of Islam. Of these, he considered the pilgrimage to Mecca to be especially irrational:

> According to Ibn al-Rāwandī: 'The prophet [Muhammad] brought with him things that are incompatible with reason, like prayer, ablution of major ritual impurity, throwing stones [during the pilgrimage], circumambulating a sanctuary (*bayt*) that neither hears nor sees, and running between two hills that neither help nor harm. All these are things that reason does not necessitate . . . What is the difference of circulating the sanctuary (*al-bayt*) [of Kaʿba] and that of circulating any other building (*ghayrihi min al-buyūt*)?'
>
> (Kraus 1934, 99).

Ibn al-Rāwandī's works received many refutations by different authors (Ibn al-Nadīm 1870, 177, 237). Interestingly, the significant Muslim philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 950) wrote a refutation (not extant) on Ibn al-Rāwandī's *Kitāb Adab al-Jadal*, 'The Book of the Manners of the Dialectics' (al-Qifṭī 1903, 279; al-Aʿsam 2010, 182). It is interesting to note that al-Fārābī read and was familiar with Ibn al-Rāwandī's ideas, since it could be suggested that some of al-Fārābī's ideas about the particularities of prophecy, for example, resemble Ibn al-Rāwandī's notions, although he wrote a refutation on the *Kitāb Adab al-Jadal*. Both gave reason first place among the vehicles to the pursuit of truth. Prophecy only provided likenesses of the truth (al-Fārābī) or, perhaps, not even that (Ibn al-Rāwandī).

To recapitulate, Ibn al-Rāwandī attacked the Quranic notions of God and theodicy. Though he never denies the existence of God explicitly, in his opinion the Quranic God is not merciful at all, but a despot. This is linked with his criticism of the Quran. Ibn al-Rāwandī also disputed prophetical revelations in general as having much truth value. In his thinking, the role of God as the creator is also belittled. The universe might stem from God, but

His will and agency in its creation is not important. Here, Ibn al-Rāwandī agreed with some of the Muslim philosophers, though he seems to have presented his remarks on cosmogony in very polemical and stark terms.

Though none of Ibn al-Rāwandī's works are extant today as manuscripts, many of them seem to have survived throughout the Middle Ages, and other scholars quoted and engaged with his arguments. For example, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200) notes that he had manuscripts of Ibn al-Rāwandī's various works in his possession (Ibn al-Jawzī 2010, VII, 415–16). The afterlife of his ideas is difficult to gauge, however, since no later author quoted his works approvingly or wanted to affiliate with him. It is possible that he influenced the two figures presented below: Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and al-Maʿarrī. The latter even refers to Ibn al-Rāwandī and his works explicitly, though in a critical manner. In any case, these explicit references suggest that al-Maʿarrī had read at least some of Ibn al-Rāwandī's books. The similarities and differences in Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's thought have been explored in the significant book-length study of Sarah Stroumsa (1999), whereas those of Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Maʿarrī have been discussed in an article (Lindstedt 2011).

Abū Bakr al-Rāzī

The next figure to be presented is Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, a physician, philosopher, and alchemist, who was born *c.* 864 and died in 925 or 934. He was born in Rayy (modern Tehran), though he also lived in Baghdad. If Ibn al-Rāwandī died in 910 (rather than 859 – see above), it is possible that Abū Bakr al-Rāzī might have encountered him in Baghdad. Abū Bakr al-Rāzī could have also read his works. Be that as it may, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī never mentions Ibn al-Rāwandī in his surviving works or the quotations that we have from his lost works, so this is only speculation. Like Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī engaged in debate with the rationalistic Islamic school of theology, the Muʿtazila, whose members did not, in Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's opinion, give reason enough preference over revelation (Vallat 2015).

Al-Rāzī was mostly appreciated as a theorist and practitioner of medicine, and his highly influential medical works are extant today. However, he also put forward original philosophical theories, such as an idiosyncratic cosmogony (see Abū Ḥātim 2003, 30) and anti-religious views. Above it was stated that most Muslim philosophers were of the opinion that creation is eternal, but Abū Bakr al-Rāzī argued that it is actually created in time. Both philosophy and criticism of religion are present in his work *al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*, 'The Spiritual Medicine', which has survived. His most vehement criticism against

Islam and other religions was included in a lost work called *Kitāb Makhārīq al-Anbiyāʾ*, 'The Fraudulent Tricks of the Prophets', of which only some citations are extant. It should be remembered that also Ibn al-Rāwandī claimed that the miracles of the prophets are only *makhārīq*, fraudulent tricks or legerdemain. Once again, direct influence is possible but not proven.

Let us begin with the extant work, *al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī* (English translation: al-Rāzī 1950). The work is a popular philosophical and ethical treatise that suggests foundations for a good life based on empirical evidence and rational reasoning. It is reason, rather than tradition and imitation, that is key. Al-Rāzī begins his first chapter thus (1950, 20): 'The Creator (Exalted be His Name) gave and bestowed upon us Reason to the end that we might thereby attain and achieve every advantage, that lies within the nature of such as us to attain and achieve, in this world and the next.'

The work's criticism of religion is rather slight and between the lines: religion is simply overlooked for the most part. However, al-Rāzī does note for instance that the rituals of religion, and ritual purity conceptions, are irrational:

> As for ritual, this calls for merely a few words to demonstrate that it is an accident of the passion and not the intellect; we shall therefore say something on this subject brief and to the point. Cleanliness and purity ought to be assessed only by senses, not by analogy; and matters therewith connected should be regulated according to the reach of the sensation, not of the imagination. If the senses fail to perceive any filth in a thing, we call it clean. (al-Rāzī 1950, 86)

The *Kitāb Makhārīq al-Anbiyāʾ* is, as stated above, not extant but survives in some citations and descriptions by other Arabic authors. Reconstructing the work is tricky (see Stroumsa 1999, 90–120). The most important source for it is the book called *Aʿlām al-Nubuwwa*, 'the Signs of Prophecy', by the contemporaneous Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī. (The names are similar, but the reader should keep their difference in mind.) The book presents, in fact, a refutation of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's views about prophecy. In the book, Abū Ḥātim (2003, 15–21) describes meeting Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (whom he calls *mulḥid*, 'heretic') on different occasions on which they argued about philosophical and religious matters. However, these oral debates do not seem to be very important for the bulk of the book and could be simply a literary device, since in other instances of the work Abū Ḥātim refers to an anonymous book, and its different chapters, by Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (see, e.g. Abū Ḥātim 2003, 39–40). It is reasonable to suppose that that book was the *Kitāb Makhārīq al-Anbiyāʾ*. Abū

Ḥātim states, however, that he is not quoting the book of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī always verbatim: rather, he abridges Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's arguments and gives only the main points (Abū Ḥātim 2003, 142). Furthermore, most of the book consists of Abū Ḥātim's own apologetics for prophecy and Islam rather than the refutation of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's ideas (for a collection of the latter, see Kraus (1936)).

With these cautionary notions in mind, let us see what we can say about Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's anti-religious arguments on the basis of Abū Ḥātim's quotations. Comparisons to Ibn al-Rāwandī come readily to mind. Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, too, denied the miracles of the prophets (Abū Ḥātim 2003, 147). Similarly to Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī opined that religions have spread with the help of bloodshed (Stroumsa 1999, 97–8). And, finally, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī also notes that the Quran is in no way miraculous in its style or contents: a thousand literary works of equal or higher merit could be adduced from prose writer, orators, and poets (Abū Ḥātim 2003, 173).

Nevertheless, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's thought edifice also includes a comparative religious aspect that seems to be absent in Ibn al-Rāwandī. Abū Bakr al-Rāzī remarks that the religions of the world differ in their conception of the godhead. Muslims are strictly monotheistic, while Zoroastrians are dualists, and Christians profess trinitarianism (Abū Ḥātim 2003, 126). From an epistemological and metaphysical point of view, these divergences are unacceptable. Philosophy, on the other hand, aims for truth statements that are universal, says Abū Bakr al-Rāzī. Religions of the world (Abū Bakr al-Rāzī mentions Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and Brahminism) present metaphysical claims that seem only valid for and to a specific community, and this is absurd. None of the religions have become universal. Indeed, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī suggests that the prevalence of a religion in a given historical and geographical context is only due to *al-qahr wa-l-ghalaba*, 'coercion and conquest', not to the merits of its views about the world and metaphysics (Abū Ḥātim 2003, 133). Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, hence, discards the particular truth statements of the religions. Interestingly (not least so from the postmodern perspective), his critic Abū Ḥātim (2003, 136–7) indeed embraces such relativism: all religions are ways to the truth and contain both truths and falsehoods in their theological discourses. What might work in a country or an era does not necessary work elsewhere in a different historical context.

Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's remarks about the connections of religions with violence and political domination have just been noted. In addition to that, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's submits that religion (*al-dīn*) stems from religious leaders rather

than any divine entity. It has human origins. People blindly imitate their leaders and, in most societies, empirical scholarship and rational reasoning have been suppressed, according to Abū Bakr al-Rāzī. What is more, anyone not accepting the religious dogma uncritically risks death (Abū Ḥātim 2003, 39).

It has been seen that Abū Bakr al-Rāzī shares many characteristics in his criticism of religion with Ibn al-Rāwandī. Their anti-religious views are, indeed, stark and presented in an unembellished style. After the tenth century, it seems, putting forward similar remarks in Arabic scholarly writing would have been a risky undertaking. Later philosophers and thinkers, such as Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185), might have held doubts about organized religion, but they never ventured, for example, that the Quran might contain discrepancies. However, freethought could be cultivated and expressed more freely in the context of poetry and fictional prose. It is to such an author, Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī, that we now turn.

Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī

One of the important vehicles of expressing doubt, scepticism, and disbelief was poetry. This section deals with the blind Syrian poet and prose writer Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī, but it is worthwhile noting that other poets also put forward similar views. For example, the earlier *enfant terrible* Abū Nuwās (d. 814) wrote poems in which he praised the drinking of wine, telling his drinking companions: 'let us disobey the tyrant of the heavens!' (Rosenthal 1983, 137, n. 761). This could be called a rather impolite way to speak of God. Moreover, somewhat later than al-Maʿarrī, the famous Persian poet and scholar ʿOmar Khayyām composed poetry in which he doubted, for example, corporeal resurrection and posed troubling questions about theodicy.

Al-Maʿarrī was born in 973 and died in 1058 in the North Syrian town of Maʿarrat al-Nuʿmān, whence his name. He became blind at a young age. This meant that throughout his life he had servants who read him books and, later, to whom he dictated his own poems and prose works. Al-Maʿarrī came from a well-off local family and received his education in his hometown and Aleppo. As a youth, he might have travelled elsewhere in Syria too in search of knowledge, but this is not certain (for the life and works of al-Maʿarrī, see von Kremer 1888; Nicholson 1921; al-Jundī 1964; Saleh 1969, 1970; Friedmann 1979; Ghali 1981; Smoor 1985; Lacey 1995; Badran 1999; Peltz 2013).

Around 1008, al-Maʿarrī left for Baghdad, possibly in pursuit of a career as a scholar and poet in the big city. However, his stay there was not fruitful, and he decided to return to his hometown in 1010. His father had died a few

years before he had left for Bagdad, but when he came back, he found that his mother had passed away as well. This was a great personal loss for him. Because of this and the unsuccessful trip to Bagdad, he decided to practice ascetism for the rest of his life. Al-Maʿarrī had already chosen celibacy as his way of life. Indeed, he opined that having offspring is a type of transgression towards the children, since life is 'sorrow and bitter pain', as al-Maʿarrī says in a poem (Nicholson 1921, 49). In another, he states that 'I gave peace to my children, for they are in the bliss of non-existence which surpasses all the pleasures of this world' (Nicholson 1921, 139).

Such pessimistic views about life did not lead to nihilism in him. Some of his poems argue against warfare (Nicholson 1921, 101), for instance, while others censure the law of retaliation (Nicholson 1921, 80). Moreover, he embraced and propagated veganism as a diet that would produce the least pain in living beings. Hence, his aim in both celibacy and veganism was the same: to alleviate suffering in the world. Towards the end of his life, al-Maʿarrī had become a popular figure and litterateur in Maʿarrat al-Nuʿmān. He received students from different regions and seems to have gained not only fame but wealth as well.

There are a multitude of aspects in the oeuvre of al-Maʿarrī that one could discuss, but here only his freethinking and scepticism are discussed. Of his surviving works, I will only mention two that are of importance as regards the theme of this chapter: the *Luzūm mā lā Yalzam*, 'The Necessity of That Which Is Not Necessary', a compilation of poetry, and a prose work entitled *Risālat al-Ghufrān*, 'The Epistle of Forgiveness'. It will be seen that many of the aspects of al-Maʿarrī's freethinking were present in the oeuvre of Ibn al-Rāwandī. It is interesting to note that in the case of al-Maʿarrī, we have explicit proof that he knew some works of Ibn al-Rāwandī. This emerges in the latter part of al-Maʿarrī's *Risālat al-Ghufrān*, where the author mentions (and chastises) a number of Muslims he considered heretics.

As for the English translation of the *Luzūm mā lā Yalzam*, we shall make do with a selection of poems translated (rather freely) by Nicholson (1921) in an archaic idiom. With the *Risālat al-Ghufrān*, the situation is more fortunate, since the complete text was translated into English by Geert van Gelder and Gregor Schoeler and published in two heavily annotated volumes in 2013–2014. Both translations also contain the Arabic text of the originals.

It has to be remembered that al-Maʿarrī was not a systematic thinker or philosopher, but a poet and a writer of fictional prose (Nicholson 1921, 44). A coherent worldview does not arise from his poems and other works, which are often contradictory in their import. His Arabic style is often difficult,

replete with rare vocabulary and expressions. Oftentimes, he simply asks questions without providing answers. For instance, concerning determinism and free will, he queries: 'in the space 'tween past and future am I compelled / To action? or have I power and freedom to do my best?' (Nicholson 1921, 70). It is also important to notice that, in contrast with the two freethinkers dealt with above, al-Maʿarrī comes across as a deeply pious and God-conscious believer, though he also put forward criticism of organized religion. In his introduction to the *Luzūm mā lā Yalzam*, al-Maʿarrī explains that the purpose of his collection of poetry is to 'awaken the sleeping' and to promulgate piety. He notes that other poets embellish their words with lies, while he himself aims for truth (al-Maʿarrī 1961, I, 39). This, like other aspects discussed in this chapter, points towards the wide scope of different intellectual approaches adopted by medieval Muslim scholars, which cannot be reduced to dichotomies such as believer vs atheist.

Al-Maʿarrī's freethinking includes many similarities with Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī. For all of them, religions are human enterprises. As al-Maʿarrī writes in his *Luzūm mā lā Yalzam* (transl. Nicholson 1921, 106): 'The religions of the world have come down to us after a system which they themselves contrived. / And some of them altered the doctrines of the others, and intelligent minds perceived the falsity of that which they affirmed to be true.' Or consider the following (Nicholson 1921, 173): 'O fools, awake! The rites ye sacred hold / Are but a cheat contrived by men of old, / Who lusted after wealth and gained their lust / And died in baseness – and their law is dust.' What is more, all three opined that religions have been spread with violence (Nicholson 1921, 177).

Above, it was stated that Abū Bakr al-Rāzī submitted that the differences between the religions of the world show that their truth statements are not universal. In his poetry, al-Maʿarrī expresses similar views (Nicholson 1921, 86): 'The union of all mankind in error, from East to West, / Amongst them was made complete by difference of rite and creed.' Both Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and al-Maʿarrī submit that the divergences in the world's religions' truth statements reveal that *none* of them hold water. In his *Risālat al-Ghufrān*, al-Maʿarrī notes:

> Being devout is instinctive in human nature; it is considered a safe refuge. As a young child grows up he learns what he hears from adults and it stays with him forever. All who dwell in monks' cells and worship in mosques accept their conditions and ideas just as any report that is transmitted, without distinguishing between the truthfulness and the falsehood of the interpreter. If somebody were to find that his kin were Zoroastrians, he would become

> a Zoroastrian himself; or, if they belonged to the Ṣābians, he would join them likewise . . . But where is he who can bear to submit to the rulings of reason and who thoroughly polishes his understanding? Alas, this is to be found neither among those upon whom the sun rises nor among those who lie as corpses in their graves – save when there is an exceptional man in the world who is characterised by complete excellence.
>
> (al-Maʿarrī 2013–14, II, 85)

Here, al-Maʿarrī puts forward propositions similar to Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, quoted above: people only grow up in a certain environment and receive the religious identity and practice from their family. All the religions are, in this respect, the same. Religious dogma contain both truths and falsehoods, but the average believer does not distinguish between the two. Only 'an exceptional man' understands that rational reasoning leads to the truth.

Like Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's criticism of religion, al-Maʿarrī's one is rather all-encompassing. The latter does not see much good in organized religion, saying that he sees religion 'diseased: whoso is healthy and hope to cure / Its sickness, he labours long and meanwhile himself falls sick' (Nicholson 1921, 86).

However, in contrast to the other two freethinkers, al-Maʿarrī does not really expand his criticism to the realm of prophecy, so his denunciation of Islam is more fine-tuned. There are, to be sure, verses in his *Luzūm mā lā Yalzam* that suggest that he held scriptures and revelations such as the Quran to be forged by human beings (Nicholson 1921, 110): 'They recite their sacred books, although the fact informs me that these are a fiction from first to last. / O Reason, thou (alone) speakest the truth. Then perish the fools who forged the (religious) traditions or interpreted them!' Then again, he might be for the most part disparaging prophetical traditions (*ḥadīth*s) that the Muslim religious scholars transmitted and safeguarded. Religious scholars are often the butt of criticism in al-Maʿarrī's poems: they are untruthful and self-serving (Nicholson 1921, 108–9). In any case, reason is called 'a prophet' in one of al-Maʿarrī's poems (Badran 1999), so the significance of prophecy and revelation as usually understood by Muslim religious scholars is not paramount according to al-Maʿarrī.

Above it was stated that both Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī denied the Islamic dogma according to which the Quran cannot be imitated or surpassed in beauty. They stated that poets have produced better works than it. Already during the life of al-Maʿarrī, it was rumoured that he tried to outshine or parody the Quran in one of his works, the enigmatic *Kitāb al-Fuṣūl wa-l-Ghāyāt*, 'The Book of Chapters and Endings', which survives only

partially (for the analysis of this work, see the detailed study by Peltz (2013)). Al-Maʿarrī's work is written in rhyme prose that formally follows the Quran, but its contents, vocabulary, and style are rather different. There is no consensus in the modern scholarship (as there was no consensus in medieval Arabic literature) what al-Maʿarrī endeavoured to accomplish with the *Kitāb al-Fuṣūl wa-l-Ghāyāt*, and parody or imitation of the Quran is only one of the possibilities.

Muslim freethinkers did not think much of the external rites of religion. Ibn al-Rāwandī attacked in particular the pilgrimage to Mecca, while Abū Bakr al-Rāzī stated that there is no such thing as *ritual* purity or impurity: there is only purity or impurity that one can assess empirically. In a similar vein to Ibn al-Rāwandī, al-Maʿarrī's *Luzūm mā lā Yalzam* includes a number of poems where he mocks the pilgrimage. For example: 'Abstainer in two respects am I, never having touched / A woman of swelling breast or kissed pilgrim-wise the Stone' (Nicholson 1921, 78). Even more starkly, in another poem he states that 'the Black Stone is only a remnant of idols' (Nicholson 1921, 177). In his opinion, pilgrimage to Mecca had pagan origins and had nothing to do with the pure monotheism he espoused. His pilgrimage denigration stands out, however, since in his poems al-Maʿarrī underscores the importance of practising the other rituals of Islam: prayer, fast, and alms.

Many citations from Ibn al-Rāwandī engaged with the question of theodicy, especially in relation to the debate of predestination versus free will. Similarly, al-Maʿarrī dealt with this question in his poetry and, for the most part, denied predestination (Nicholson 1921, 147). He stated, for instance (Nicholson 1921, 162): 'If criminals are fated, / 'Tis wrong to punish crime.'

Muslim philosophers were of the opinion that Quranic depictions of the afterlife are similes. In actual fact, only the rational soul is eternal in human beings. There is no such thing as corporeal resurrection or corporeal afterlife. For Muslim theologians and other religious scholars, on the other hand, the afterlife was indeed corporeal and the Quranic description of it was to be accepted as is, not as a simile. Al-Maʿarrī, though a poet and not a philosopher or theologian, was deeply fascinated by these divergent debates and discourses concerning the afterlife. He states that God is indeed able to raise the dead (Nicholson 1921, 181), but for the most part his poetry reflects views akin to those of the philosophers. He doubts the corporeal resurrection (Nicholson 1921, 72): 'When spirit journeys away from body, its dwelling-place / Then hath body naught to do but sink and be seen no more.' What is more, at the moment of death people are 'shattered like glass and thereafter / Remoulded no more' (Nicholson 1921, 186). Elsewhere he even states that he

approves of cremation (Nicholson 1921, 138), which was an anathema to the vast majority of Muslims.

Taken together, it is probable to read his poetry as suggesting that there is no such thing as corporeal resurrection. Indeed, his prose work *Risālat al-Ghufrān*, 'The Epistle of Forgiveness', can be read as a parody of a corporeal afterlife (for the work, see the translators' introduction to al-Maʿarrī (2013–14) and Hegazi (2017)). In it, the protagonist is depicted as having died and received a place in paradise. To the surprise of the protagonist, a number of poets, known for their frivolous lifestyles, have also been admitted. As the name of the work states, they have received forgiveness. The paradise of the *Risālat al-Ghufrān* is a place of gossip and corporeal delights, such as drinking wine and eating delicious foods. Such pleasures are mentioned by the Quran, and the *Risālat al-Ghufrān* seems to caricature such depictions. This is what a corporeal afterlife would be like, al-Maʿarrī seems to be saying: there is really no point in believing in such nonsense. The author never explicitly attacks or denies Islamic conceptions of heaven, and this is the whole point. By parading on the stage literary figures and scenes that are absurd and ridiculous but that are not as such against the orthodox theological speculations of the afterlife, al-Maʿarrī can satirize them without making himself look unorthodox. The *Risālat al-Ghufrān* is a satire of not only the Islamic conceptions of the afterlife but also the narratives about the trip of the Prophet Muhammad to heaven (*miʿrāj*), where he is said to have met earlier prophets and received a glimpse of the afterlife as well.

The *Risālat al-Ghufrān* is interesting also for the fact that it mentions Ibn al-Rāwandī. He is condemned as a vehement heretic by al-Maʿarrī. His following works are mentioned: *Kitāb al-Tāj*, *Kitāb al-Dāmigh*, *Kitāb al-Qaḍīb*, *Kitāb al-Farīd*, and *Kitāb al-Marjān* (some of which were discussed above). Al-Maʿarrī focuses mainly on wordplays that he employs to revile Ibn al-Rāwandī. For example: 'As for *The Brain-Basher* [*Kitāb al-Dāmigh*], I imagine that it bashed only the brains of him who composed it and it took his place in a bad succession . . . This man (*viz*. Ibn al-Rāwandī) is now like faded threads, but the awful thing [is] that he is still mentioned through the ages' (al-Maʿarrī 2013–14, II, 93).

Interestingly, the commonalities between Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Maʿarrī were already noted in the Middle Ages by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200) in his *Talbīs Iblīs*. Ibn al-Jawzī (1367 AH, 67; transl. in Lindstedt 2011, 132) says of the two:

> The hearts of the heretics, for instance Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū l-ʿAlāʾ [al-Maʿarrī], became vexed at the spread of the word of truth and the establishment of the religious laws among the people and their obedience to the

> commandments. What is more, they found that their own doctrines did not gain any ground or influence . . . [For this reason,] some of them began to throw doubts on the transmitters of tradition and criticize the chains of authorities [used in classical Islamic scholarship to prove the authenticity of the transmitted traditions].

In the passage, Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Maʿarrī are juxtaposed. The reason for their 'heresy' is explicitly identified as envy for the triumph of Islam. A link between their criticism of the transmitted traditions and rejection of prophecy is also assumed, not without grounds.

One final note. Despite his rationalism and concern for the well-being of animals, for example, it would be false to make al-Maʿarrī an all-around exemplary figure of the past. He was to a large extent a human of his time. For instance, he suggests that ethnic groups should be kept 'pure', discouraging intermarriage. Though he thinks that religions are basically human endeavours, he still ranks Islam higher than the others, putting forward pejorative stereotypes of Jews and Christians, for instance. Non-Muslims are second-class citizens (Nicholson 1921, 115–16). His views about women are often highly misogynistic: what he calls 'the vanity of the women' is one of his cherished topics in his poetry. On the other hand, he argues against polygyny as an injustice to women (Nicholson 1921, 114).

Conclusion and the Afterlife of Freethought

It has been argued in this chapter that because it was generally accepted that the existence of God is proven beyond doubt on the basis of rational deduction, there were, as far as we can tell, no atheists proper among the Muslims in the Middle Ages. However, Ibn al-Rāwandī downplayed the role of God as the creator and omniscient being. For Ibn al-Rāwandī, god is spelled with a lower case initial letter. Though we lack atheists, we have ample evidence of freethinkers who doubted or denounced revelation and prophecy. For them, organized religions were human constructs. Traditional Islamic theology gives prophecy prime importance: all communities have received revelation through prophets sent to them. Without divine revelation communicated to the prophets, human life, organized society, and laws are all but inconceivable, according to the Muslim scholars. For this reason, it is not surprising that the freethinkers attacked prophecy in particular. Their disputing of the value and significance of prophecy was a much more radical attack on Islam than it might seem at first sight to modern readers (in particular non-Muslim readers).

Tracing the afterlife of the different aspects of freethought advanced by Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and al-Maʿarrī is difficult. The critical works of Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī were circulated and read throughout the Middle Ages, but few took a positive stance towards them. Al-Maʿarrī's works are extant today but he, too, was a controversial figure in later reception.

However, there are some Muslim authors in the later Middle Ages that held views somewhat similar to the earlier freethinkers. One can, for instance, mention the Andalusian philosopher, physic, and mystic Ibn Ṭufayl (born in Guadix *c.* 1110–20s, died in Marrakesh in 1185). In his philosophical novel *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* (on which see Kukkonen (2014); for a translation of the work, consult Ibn Ṭufayl (1972)), he put forward that good life is (only?) possible outside human societies and organized religions. The protagonist, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, who lives most of his life on a deserted island, meets other human beings towards the end of the book. Their religion is not named as Islam, but its description suggests that Ibn Ṭufayl intended the allusion to be to it. The protagonist of the book recognizes that even though this religion contained true elements, these truths are only presented through symbols, not as they really are (Kukkonen 2014, 111–26). Through the mouth of Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, Ibn Ṭufayl suggests that organized religion is created by human beings, for human beings. The book also explicitly denies corporeal afterlife (Ibn Ṭufayl 1972, 161). Many of these notions are similar to those advanced by Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and al-Maʿarrī. In any case, surveying the afterlife of aspects of freethought in the works of later Muslim authors up to the present day remains a desideratum. An interesting and important question would be to what extent contemporary and in which ways modern Muslim reformists and atheists revisit and utilize this rich medieval tradition.

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PART III

*

REFORMATION, RENAISSANCE, ENLIGHTENMENT

10

Reformation

ALEC RYRIE

The subject of atheism in the Reformation era is caught awkwardly between two ill-fitting facts. First, 'atheism', strictly defined, was rare if not actively impossible in this period. Second, accusations of atheism, and moral panic about its spread, were nevertheless ubiquitous. It is in trying to reconcile these two facts that we can reach some understanding of how the Reformation era proved to be a decisive phase in the history of unbelief.

The claim that atheism was inconceivable in the Reformation age is usually associated with the great French literary scholar Lucien Febvre, and it is conventional for modern historians of the subject to begin by ridiculing this claim as overblown, but in fact Febvre's position was subtler than is usually allowed. He was well aware of our second fact. His view was that in the sixteenth century the word '"atheist" . . . did not have a strictly defined meaning. It was used in whatever sense one wanted to give it', and was merely 'a kind of obscenity meant to cause a shudder in an audience of the faithful': a vague and usually exaggerated insult, akin to the vernacular use of the word *fascist* today. There were, he admitted, people who might bluntly deny that there is a God and who might be charged with blasphemy as a result, but he argued that such denials 'rest solely on personal impulses and moods . . . caprice, whim, or a vain wish to attract attention'. Faced with such a denier, Febvre reckoned, 'there is nothing for the historian to do but pass him over in silence, to leave him alone'. For 'We are dealing with an age when the most intelligent of men, the most learned, and the most daring were truly incapable of finding any support either in philosophy or science against a religion whose domination was universal.' Atheism was *intellectually* impossible, on this view, and so occasional outbursts of incoherent unbelief should simply be ignored. Such 'atheists' are the early modern equivalent of flat-earthers: that is, just because they existed does not mean we should take them seriously (Febvre 1982, 132, 135, 352–3).

The claim that atheism was intellectually impossible is overstated – Epicureanism, which at most permits only very etiolated gods, was certainly imaginable, and Lucretius was widely read following his fifteenth-century rediscovery – but it is more or less true that, before Spinoza in the 1660s, it was very difficult for Europeans to think coherently about the universe and themselves without invoking a deity. To move beyond Febvre's dismissal, then, we need to notice two things. First, that early modern Europeans did not use the word *atheist* in the same sense we do; and second, that historically meaningful and significant unbelief remains possible even in the absence of philosophically coherent atheism. Indeed, it may be that unbelief as a social and cultural phenomenon is a necessary precondition for intellectual atheism. Human beings generally only develop philosophies when they need them.

Varieties of Atheism

The Greek word ἄθεος (*atheos*) means, literally, without God or gods. It was a term of abuse applied to people who rejected or neglected socially established religious norms, such as Socrates or indeed some early Christians. The Latin word *atheos* was scarcely ever used in ancient times. When the Greek word was translated into Latin, *impius*, 'impious', was usually felt to be the nearest synonym. The word ἄθεοι occurs only once in the Bible (Ephesians 2:12), and this was translated into Latin as *sine Die*, 'without God'. Only with the rediscovery of Greek in the Christian west during the Renaissance did the word come into widespread use – transliterated into Latin as *atheos* in the early sixteenth century, and then very quickly spreading into European vernaculars: Italian *ateo*, German *Atheist*, French *athée*. It arrived late in English, via French, in 1553. It swiftly became widely used in all of these languages: it was plainly a word that the sixteenth century, Febvre's 'century that wanted to believe', felt it needed. But it also had a much wider range of meaning than the precision implied by the modern term 'atheist'. A more literal translation of the Greek original might be 'godless': which fits early modern usage better, and modern discourse on unbelief might also benefit from rediscovering that broader meaning. In the early modern period, this means that the term 'atheist' was less a tool of the philosopher's trade than a weapon in the polemicist's arsenal.

It is tempting to see 'atheist' in this sense as a generic insult almost devoid of meaning, but the word's elasticity had its limits. We may discern five broad, overlapping senses in which the word was used in the Reformation

age. None of them are 'atheistic' in the strict modern sense, but the word is not meaningless in its application to any of them, and all of them form part of the history of western atheism. This first section of this chapter will deal with the three categories of atheism which the Reformation inherited from the Renaissance. The remaining two sections will explore the final two categories in more depth.

First is what contemporaries often called 'practical atheism', which we might call functional or enacted atheism: a label applied to those who were not professed unbelievers, and who indeed 'may say that they are persuaded there is a God, but in their doings they bear themselves as if there were no God' (Perkins 1593, 37). It was often said that this was widespread, even nearly universal. For it was a moral rather than a theological category, applied to people whose religious failings were so extreme that they could be identified with the biblical fool who says in his heart, 'There is no God' (Psalms 14:1, 53:1). The relentless seventeenth-century moralist Richard Younge, in the course of a 900-page tirade against drunkenness, diagnosed wishful thinking behind this variety of atheism. Drunkards, he argued, would find it convenient if there were no God, and 'what we would have to be, we are apt to believe'. The problem with this, as Younge added, was not only that such people tended outwardly to avow orthodox faith, but even inwardly to believe they held it: 'It is hard for men to believe their own unbelief' (Younge 1638, 558–9).

This was a commonplace: atheism could lurk unsuspecting in every breast. William Perkins warned that 'these two thoughts, *There is a God*, and *there is no God*, may be, and are both in one and the same heart'. For those who reassured themselves that 'they never felt in themselves any such conceits as this, *that there is no God*', Perkins had a stark warning: 'a man cannot always discern what be the thoughts of his own heart' (Perkins 1607, 33, 51). It was a commonplace of the Reformation age, which mixed a high doctrine of faith with a hair-trigger sensitivity to hypocrisy, that a great many people did not truly believe what they believe they believe. It could even be hard to believe that you yourself believe what you believe you believe. By this logic, every living soul contained at least a sliver of atheism.

In practice, however, this hidden, 'practical' atheism could be known by its fruits. The clearest of these was the absence of devotion. Those who did not pray, or who did not pray enough, or who only prayed when they thought others might see them, were widely assumed to be atheists. Lax or fatalistic religious observance was no better. To argue that prayer was futile, since God's will cannot be swayed by human petitions, was to court the accusation

of atheism. Such 'atheists' might sincerely believe there is a God. The point was that their belief did not manifest itself in the approved ways.

The second classic variety of atheist was the scoffer or blasphemer. If fools said in their hearts that there was no God, some also said it in their cups. Naturally, po-faced theologians took this sort of thing seriously. 'They who blaspheme Christ and his Gospel in jest, are Atheists in good earnest', warned the Cambridge divine Francis Cheynell (Cheynell 1650, sig. B1 r-v). Again, however, these petty blasphemies usually turn out to be less about postulating God's absence than about resisting moral authority, and so defying the God in whose name that authority was imposed. In 1589 the Nottinghamshire gentleman John Mignot was accused of atheism by his neighbours in blood-curdling terms. As the court dug into these scandalous claims, it became clear that it all stemmed from an argument between Mignot and one of his tenants over a shilling, in which Mignot had said 'that neither for God's sake nor for the devil's sake would he pay it' (Cressy 2000, 162–70). Clearly it was the money, not God, which was the focus of his concern. And his defiance of the devil was probably as important as his defiance of God. For those trying to shrug off unwelcome moral constraints, it made sense to deny the existence of Hell or of eternal judgement. This is the unbelief of wishful thinking; and it explains why 'atheist' and 'libertine' were near-synonyms.

Third, and blurring into this, there is the more serious 'atheism' of those who questioned, denied, or defied established doctrines in a more sustained or determined manner. It is these rare individuals who have attracted most of the scholarly attention given to early modern atheism. However pervasive the assumptions of the 'age of faith' might have been, there was a slow-cooking epistemological crisis in late medieval and early modern Europe which was calling the whole possibility of certain knowledge into question. Some individuals were asking bluntly sceptical questions; a few arrived at religio-philosophical positions that amounted to a denial of Christianity, even if not of theism as such. Paolo Sarpi, Jean Bodin, Walter Raleigh, Geoffroy Vallée, Uriel Acosta, the contentious case of the Friulian miller Mennochio – there are a handful of records of people, learned and unlearned, who had thought through their religious positions and seem to have ended up in places which did not look much like Christianity (or Judaism) any more. While this phenomenon is better documented for the early modern period than for the Middle Ages, there is no doubt it existed in medieval Europe too. And while we have hard evidence only of tiny numbers of such people, we might also expect that those who found themselves thinking such dangerous thoughts would normally conceal them. It was certainly a phenomenon that worried

orthodox early modern believers. In his 1605 polemic against atheism, John Dove claimed to be attacking those who believe

> that there was no creation of the world, that there shall be no day of judgement, no resurrection, no immortality of the soul, no hell: they dispute against the Bible, reckon up genealogies more ancient than Adam, allege arguments to prove that the story of Noah's Ark and the Deluge were fables: Finally they hold that the Scriptures were devised by men, only for policy's sake. (Dove 1605, 4–5)

Not atheism in the fullest sense, perhaps; but such a denial of core Christian doctrines was clearly both conceivable and deeply unsettling.

What distinguished this freethinking, as we might call it, from mere scoffing and blasphemy was not so much philosophical consistency as sheer determination. Christopher Marlowe's supposedly atheistic claims (for example, accusing Christ, his mother, and the apostles of whoredom, sodomy, and adultery) seem to have been driven more by a desire to shock, and a lacerating hatred of the Church's morality, than by any theological reasoning. After all, Christ could not, as he claimed, be both Joseph's natural son and also the bastard child of Mary's adultery with the Holy Spirit. Another route, rarely recognized in this connection but perhaps more serious, was magic. Renaissance mages from Cornelius Agrippa to John Dee were not 'atheists' in the modern sense, but nor were they good Christians. They were experimental metaphysicians who had set out from a world of Christian orthodoxy and had ended up somewhere a little different. Neoplatonic magic was perhaps closer to atheism than any other developed philosophical system available in the early modern world.

These, then, were the categories of unbelief formed out of the Renaissance and on which the Protestant Reformation impinged. How did the Reformation itself change the picture?

The Weaponization of Scepticism

A well-established historiographical narrative gives the Reformation a key role in the rise of atheism and of modern secularism, seeing them as natural consequences of an age of irreconcilable religious division. During the sixteenth century, on this narrative, western Christendom split into rival parties, each of which regarded the others' errors as intolerable. As they dug their trenches and pounded each other with their artillery, first polemical and then literal, they tore up the religious landscape that they were each trying to control until it could no longer be recognized. With all sides condemning

each other for their false beliefs, it was hard to prevent civilians caught in the crossfire from reaching the conclusion none of the combatants wanted: what if all of them are wrong? As battles subsided into exhausted ceasefires and frozen conflicts, ordinary people and their governments began systematically to evade those conflicts and the terrible destruction they could cause by confining 'religion' to a private sphere and creating a new 'secular' public space. People who could not agree about religion could at least work around it, and eventually discovered that they did not particularly miss it. And so religion was confined to quarters, like a once-formidable relative sent to a nursing home: spoken of with respect, paid a ritual visit occasionally, its debts honoured, but not allowed out in public where it might cause distress or embarrassment. In truth – though it would be crass to say so out loud – it was simply kept ticking over until it died a natural death.

There is a good deal of truth in this narrative, but it misses how directly the Reformation drove the development of unbelief. The Protestant Reformers saw their movement as – among other things – a crusade against 'superstition'. That immensely useful word was applied to any false, misconceived, or misdirected religious practice. And since classical times, it had had an opposite: impiety, or atheism. So this was the unwelcome challenge posed to Christians in the Reformation age. Whenever their balance on the knife-edge of true religion wavered, and they were forced to fall either to superstition or impiety, which way would they choose? One's answer to that question more or less determined whether one remained a Catholic or became a Protestant. Thomas More was famously said to loathe superstition but to loathe impiety more: and so he died for his Catholicism. On this view, it was better to eat the religious diet put in front of you, however questionable, than to turn up your nose and risk starvation. By contrast, Protestants became Protestants because it was better to go hungry than to risk eating poison. Superstition was so appalling that they would take their chances with unbelief in order to be rid of it. As one English Catholic put it, not unfairly: 'a Catholic may commonly become sooner Superstitious, than a Protestant; And a Protestant sooner become an Atheist, than a Catholic' (Anderton 1640, 183).

Protestants would not put it quite like that, but the undertow consistently pulled them this way. Henry More, a subtle and moderate English Protestant theologian of the mid-seventeenth century, gave this account of the growth of atheism in his own times. In the Reformation, he argued, God had graciously permitted 'a more large release from Superstition ... a freer perusal of matters of Religion, then in former Ages'. The devil, however, had spotted an opportunity 'to carry men captive out of one dark prison into

another, out of *Superstition* into *Atheism* itself'. The smashing of the 'external frame of godliness', the cage which had kept medieval Europeans in 'blind obedience', meant that many of them now simply gave in to their unrestrained sinfulness: 'Being emboldened by the tottering and falling of what they took for Religion before, they will gladly . . . conclude that there is as well no God as no Religion' (More 1653, 1–2). More saw opposing this kind of atheism as his life's work. But the one solution he would never consider was to rebuild the prison.

As Catholics pointed out, this was not some regrettable side-effect of Protestantism. It was integral to it. The Protestants' entire business was to mount frontal assaults on long-accepted Christian doctrines, mercilessly mocking anyone gullible enough to believe the ridiculous lies spewed out by the priests of Antichrist. But these Protestants were still Christians – indeed Christians committed to preaching the supreme value of faith. They derided credulity, but had no wish to foster incredulity.

This problem – how do you reject some beliefs while still embracing others? – is an old one for Christians. Traditionally the solution involves carefully chosen acts of defiant credulity. The unbelievable can be believed precisely because it is unbelievable. That is how faith transcends reason. The early Church Father Tertullian said that he believed in Christ's incarnation 'because it is absurd'. Polemicists may therefore argue simultaneously that their faith is reasonable and logical, and also that it is a mystery which surpasses reason and is inaccessible except through faith. For in Christian terms, that is itself powerful proof that those beliefs are true. After all, reason, the human faculty that allows us to perceive truth, is fallible and corrupted: we would be very foolish to rely on it entirely. And if we know our reason to be fallible, there is nothing more rational than to submit that reason humbly to those authorities that are set above it. The word for that is faith. To defy those authorities in the name of reason is to do violence to reason itself. So if there is any apparent conflict between our frail and fallible rationality and the certainties of the true faith, it stands to reason that reason should give way.

The Protestant Reformation, however, took a battering ram to this entire structure. Alarmed Catholics were quick to warn that their enemies were attacking true faith with carnal and corrupt reason. And so, as well as defending their doctrines as logical and rational, Catholics emphasized that the Protestants were guilty of something much worse than making mistakes about theology. They were revealing themselves to be incredulous – and therefore, in Christian terms, self-evidently wrong.

Take, for example, the doctrine of transubstantiation, which Protestants frequently mocked as ridiculous. Catholics were quick to point out that Protestants thereby revealed themselves to be incredulous, trying to limit God with their own carnal reason. The correct response to the mysteries of the sacrament, Catholics insisted, was the response of Christ's own apostles: who, when Christ said to them, This is my body, responded neither with laughter nor with a barrage of sceptical questions, but with simple faith.

The sly French Catholic essayist Michel de Montaigne believed that the Protestants' scorn towards that and other Catholic doctrines had started a fire that swept quickly out of control among the common people:

> Once you have put into their hands the foolhardiness of despising and criticizing opinions . . . and once you have thrown into the balance of doubt and uncertainty any articles of their religion, they soon cast all the rest of their beliefs into similar uncertainty. They had no more authority for them, no more foundation, than for those you have just undermined . . . They then take it upon themselves to accept nothing on which they have not pronounced their own approval, subjecting it to their individual assent. (Montaigne 2013, 167)

Before long, rueful Protestants were agreeing. They reported that the devil sowed unwelcome thoughts in their minds: so, you have decided that a doctrine your parents held to be true is false, have you? What makes you think any of your other beliefs are any better founded? This slope could turn out to be slippery indeed. Well-documented stories of individuals who went from the old Church to Protestantism and beyond to more radical scepticism began to pile up.

Not that this was a uniquely Protestant problem. In this battle over credulity and incredulity, Catholics and Protestants matched and parried one another blow for blow. Protestants were just as quick as Catholics were to wield accusations of incredulity, lambasting Catholics' supposed use of blind, foolish, and carnal reason. Some even tried to turn the tables on transubstantiation, claiming that the doctrine was so lumpish and carnal that it amounted to atheism, and it is the Protestants who were seeing beyond crude, faithless literalism to the deeper, spiritual reality. It was the distinction, as the Protestant poet George Herbert put it, between looking *at* glass or looking *through* it. Herbert was uncharacteristically blunt on transubstantiation. Christ, he wrote, came 'to abolish Sin, not Wheat . . . Flesh . . . cannot turn to soul. / Bodies and Minds are different Spheres' (Herbert 1941, 200–1). That *cannot* is the heart of the matter. To Catholic ears it is incredulity, binding God's omnipotence

in the weak chains of human reason. To Protestants it is an insistence that the Catholic doctrine fundamentally misunderstands Christ's sacrifice and drags him down to the filth of humanity.

The accusation of incredulity was more than an optional extra in Reformation-era polemics. It was an invaluable way of explaining an otherwise troubling problem: why are the other side not being persuaded by the compelling theological and scriptural arguments thrown at them? They might all be idiots, or be consciously serving Satan – but that hardly seems plausible. And the suspicion that the arguments themselves might be weak was hardly to be thought of. No, the only acceptable answer was that they are fools who said in their hearts (perhaps without admitting it to themselves) that there is no God. In which case, the argument was not fundamentally about doctrine or interpretation. It was about the other side's carnal inability to see the ravishing spiritual vision which was being set before them. Defined that way, each side could lay claim to an effortless superiority while simultaneously closing down any possibility of further argument. And so the pursuit of ever more authentic faith generated constant accusations of unbelief.

So Protestants mocked Catholics as credulous; Catholics scorned Protestants as incredulous; Protestants lambasted Catholics as incredulous; naturally enough, completing the square, Catholics derided Protestant credulity when they had the chance. Here, the focus was not the Mass but the Bible. How, Catholics asked, can Protestants know that the Bible is in fact the inspired Word of God, since they refuse to accept the witness of the Church as authoritative? The Protestant answers to this challenge were varied and complex, but they mostly boiled down to a statement of faith. The Bible's authority was, they claimed, self-evident, in the sense that the Holy Spirit convinces you as you read that it is true.

Catholics made hay with this. So, ran the argument, the Holy Spirit teaches you that the Bible is the Word of God? Does this inner conviction extend equally to all sixty-six books of the Old and New Testament? To every chapter and verse of them? And to nothing else? Does the Spirit then guide your understanding of it? If so, why do other readers interpret it differently? If not, how can it be that the Spirit authorizes Scripture but lets people misinterpret it? And what about the textual glitches and variations between different manuscripts of the Bible – which is the inspired version? How can you be sure? Has the Spirit told you that too? The purpose of this Catholic argument was of course not to dismiss the Bible, but to prove that the Bible's authority ultimately derived from the Church, to which all Christians ought

to submit. But it was much easier to demolish Protestants' claims about the Bible than to establish Catholic ones in their place.

The Reformation's battle for credulity was, therefore, a high-wire act. To attack an opponent's doctrines as nonsensical and an affront to reason, while defending other doctrines as incomprehensible and transcending reason, was a heady, exhilarating and dangerous rhetorical achievement. All sides in the Reformation debates were encouraging both open-hearted faith and corrosive scepticism, teaching believers simultaneously to doubt and to loathe doubting. In this world, scepticism was not the opposite of faith. It was a necessary component of it.

In this fourth sense, then, an *atheist* can simply mean 'a person with whose religion the speaker disagrees', which may make it appear a trivial or merely abusive term. In fact, this new usage was momentous. It made atheism seem ubiquitous: a perception which was terrifying and certainly aggravated the era's religious wars, but which also, as those wars ground to an exhausted conclusion, normalized the idea of unbelief. The fifteenth century's shocking aberration became the seventeenth century's stage joke and the eighteenth century's breezy sophistication. It trained whole populations in the habits of scepticism, a training which they could not always be trusted to use in the approved manner. And it helped foster our fifth and last variety of atheism, which believers discovered not in others but in themselves.

The Atheist Within

The Protestant Reformation confronted European Christians with religious choices. Some seized those choices; many more did not want such a thing and stuck to the faith in which they had been raised – but even that was a choice. Which was profoundly disturbing, for the ancient Christian definition of a *heresy* is a doctrine that is *chosen* by an individual's own pride and self-will, rather than humbly accepted by submission to God and his Church. For believers to be forced to sit in judgement over their own beliefs was already, in a sense, atheistical.

In 1628, the English satirist and future bishop John Earle published a character sketch of a stereotypical 'sceptic in Religion'. This character is no libertine, but an agonized vacillator, who 'would be wholly a Christian, but that he is something of an Atheist, and wholly an Atheist, but that he is partly a Christian ... His whole life is a question.' He is paralysed by indecision and changes his mind with every book he reads. 'He is wondrous loath to hazard his credulity, and whilst he fears to believe amiss, believes nothing' (Earle 1966, 161, 165). Agonized doubters of this kind were all too

common in the sixteenth and especially the seventeenth centuries: Christians desperate to find religious certainty who found that their convictions turned to smoke in their hands. They responded to these crises in different ways. Some attempted desperately, with varying degrees of success, to shore up their old faiths. Some tried to reimagine or refound their beliefs, leading in some cases to explorations of the wilder shores of radicalism in the hope of discovering some firm base on which their faith might be built. Few of them ended up as atheists in the modern sense (and those who did would prudently have kept the matter quiet, for even in the seventeenth century open denials of God might easily have cost them their heads). Nevertheless, they served as corrosives of existing religious cultures and paved the way for the more self-conscious and self-confident atheisms to come. To see this at work, consider four well-known cases, two French and two English.

First is Michel de Montaigne, writing his *Essays* in genteel retirement amid the French religious wars, condemning those on both sides quick to claim they were killing in God's name. Montaigne was an avowed Catholic, but he has a persistent reputation for atheism, for his *Essays* are, mostly, astonishingly secular. Montaigne cites the Bible occasionally, but much less than ancient pagans. God rates an occasional passing mention, but so too do Fate and 'mother-like' Nature, and all of them are treated as metaphorical abstractions. In his essay 'To philosophise is to learn how to die', he does say, in passing, that 'death is the origin of another life', but its main thrust is that we ought to take comfort in death's absolute finality. 'Do you not know', he imagines Nature saying to those who fear death,

> that in real death there will be no second You, living to lament your death and standing by your corpse. 'You' will not desire the life which now you so much lament . . . Death does not concern you, dead or alive; alive, because you are: dead, because you are no more. (Montaigne 2013, 31, 33)

It is certainly clear that his Catholicism was neither simple nor straightforward. He admitted that as a young man he had been drawn to Protestantism, lured by 'an ambition to share in the hazards and hardships attendant upon that fresh young enterprise'. Many years later, some friends were convinced that he was still a Protestant 'deep down inside'. He indignantly denied it, but he admitted that at times he found some Catholic practices 'rather odd or rather empty'. He made fun of his fellow believers, finding it ridiculous, for example, that Catholic armies treated victory as vindication from God but refused to see defeat as vindication for their enemies. In his famous essay 'On

the cannibals', he argued that the supposedly savage peoples of the Americas were in truth no more barbaric than European Christians. Torturing and burning heretics is not obviously nobler than cooking and eating people (Montaigne 2013, 70, 82, 85, 119–20).

Montaigne's intellectual guiding star was the second-century Greek Sextus Empiricus, whose works had recently been rediscovered, and who was the ancient world's most powerful advocate of philosophical scepticism: the doctrine that all knowledge is uncertain. Montaigne had drunk deeply of this. It became a rule for him 'not to believe too rashly: not to disbelieve too easily', and above all not to rely on 'that fine brain of yours'. 'There is a plague on Man', he stated: 'his opinion that he knows something'. If we search for certainty on any subject, he warned, we will at length discover that 'it is impossible to find two opinions which are exactly alike, not only in different men but in the same men at different times'. No truth is ever definitively established (Montaigne 2013, 70, 187, 427).

That might sound like a shortcut to atheism, but this was not straightforwardly so. Full-blown philosophical scepticism makes God unknowable, but it also makes the material world and everything else that we think we know unknowable. Such sweeping dismissals are in the end neither very practical nor very dangerous. Short of insanity or suicide, we are forced to find some way of accepting the reality of what our senses tell us, and if we are going to accept that unreliable testimony, faith in God is only one further step. Indeed, as Montaigne showed, scepticism could be finessed into an argument *for* Christian orthodoxy. Once we have accepted that our own reason is 'a two-handled pot: you can grab it from the right or the left', we are forced to look beyond it. Whether we find a doctrine credible or incredible is beside the point. 'It is madness to judge the true and the false from our own capacities.' Instead, we need to look outside ourselves entirely, and for Montaigne that meant looking to 'the holy teachings of the Church Catholic, Apostolic and Roman, in which I die and in which I was born'. Nor could he embrace those teachings with reservations or doubts: 'We must either totally submit to the authority of our ecclesiastical polity or else totally release ourselves from it.' The very fact that he was so beset with doubts showed why he must submit his own feeble reason to the eternal certainties of the Catholic faith once revealed to the apostles and maintained faithfully in France for over a thousand years: 'Our religion did not come to us through reasoned arguments or from our own intelligence: it came to us from outside authority, by commandments. That being so, weakness of judgement helps us more than strength; blindness, more than clarity of vision.' On this view, scepticism does

not beget atheism. It is the solvent of all our pretentions to knowledge, and therefore the necessary beginning of any true faith (Montaigne 2013, 69–70, 119, 192, 226). Yet this gambit, known as *fideism*, does not actually answer doubts; it bypasses them. And as our next character shows, that comes with a cost.

William Chillingworth was an intense young student in Oxford in the 1620s, given to 'sleeping too little, and thinking too much'. He too discovered Sextus Empiricus, and scepticism went to his head: 'By degrees he grew confident of nothing, and a sceptic, at least, in the greatest mysteries of faith.' In 1629, these mounting anxieties turned into a crisis. He converted to Catholicism and travelled to an exile seminary in France. He did this, he later recalled, in a desperate search for certainty. Catholic arguments had made him doubt that there was any sure and reliable truth to be found in Protestantism, and so he sought it in the bosom of the Church of Rome (Orr 1967, 14, 17–19).

Within months he was back in England. The reality of seventeenth-century Catholic life was shockingly different from the idealized universal church he had imagined. But Chillingworth did not slot back happily into Protestantism. For as much as five years, he was 'doubting between communions'. He conferred at length with his godfather, who, conveniently, happened to be the bishop of London. Chillingworth decided to write a book thrashing out his doubts, and swore an oath to his uncle to withdraw from communion with *either* church for two years. He claimed that this was so that the planned book would appear impartial, but he was plainly also buying time for his own indecision. During this period, he worked as a tutor in a Catholic household, scandalizing his charges by telling them that his conversion to Catholicism had been because of 'the unsoundness of Protestant religion . . . and not the truth of the Catholic', adding that 'if a third way were opened, the Catholics would have no less to do to defend themselves than the Protestants' (Simpson 1861, 65–6, 72–5).

In 1635, he finally conformed to his godfather's church once again. By the time the long-awaited book was published in 1638, it had evolved into an anti-Catholic polemic, titled *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation*. But the 'Protestantism' he was defending was distinctly odd. He firmly rejected the Catholic fideists' claim to find infallible authority in the Church, but he was not simply claiming the Bible as an alternative infallible authority. Instead, he warned that infallibility was an illusion, and tried to find a way of dealing with the fact. His attack on the Catholic claim that their Church is infallible was devastatingly effective, but he was much less successful in

building up his own side of the case than at demolishing his opponents'. He could only claim to be certain that the Bible is God's Word by redefining *certainty*. We cannot, he admitted, be certain of the Bible's authority in the same way we can be certain of a mathematical theorem or even of an established scientific fact. At best we can be 'morally certain, as certain as the nature of the thing will bear' – certainty, as the lawyers say, beyond reasonable doubt (Chillingworth 1638, 73, 96–7).

In one extraordinary passage in the book's preface, Chillingworth tells his Catholic opponents that if their arguments 'weighed in an even balance ... would have turned the scale, and have made your Religion more credible then the contrary; certainly I should ... with both mine arms and all my heart most readily have embraced it' (Chillingworth 1638, sig. §§1 v). Notice the grinding gear-change in the middle of that sentence. At the start he is talking about the most finely balanced of reasoned judgements, made according to the balance of probabilities, which can be tipped by a hair: one of the two religious alternatives might emerge looking fractionally more likely than the other. Yet having made such a carefully weighed judgement, he promises to embrace whichever conclusion he reaches with 'all my heart', free from any doubt. Give him 51 per cent confidence that you are correct, and he will give 100 per cent commitment in return. For giving 100 per cent commitment is what Christians do, but this particular Christian no longer believed that much more than 51 per cent certainty was to be had. He had been playing theological beggar-my-neighbour, ensuring that everyone else's religious arguments were left looking as fragile as his own, and was making the miserable best of what was left.

Very soon England's reading public would be introduced by our third character to another model of how to live in a world of religious uncertainty. Sir Thomas Browne wanted the readers of his *Religio medici* to know that his religion was not a matter of habit: he had actively chosen it. Its principles were drawn not from any particular church, but from 'the dictates of my own reason'. That same reason, he admitted, had once led him to doubt the immortality of the soul and the existence of Hell. He had now left these errors behind him, but he continued to believe that Christian orthodoxy was beset with 'sturdy doubts', and that some of the Bible's stories 'exceed the fables of Poets'. How did Noah fit all the world's animals, plus six weeks' fodder, into a 300-cubit ark? After the Flood, how did the animals come to be dispersed across the world so quickly, not least to the Americas? It is difficult, he says, to answer such questions without 'the refuge of a Miracle': his distaste for supernatural explanations is palpable (Browne 1964, 6, 20–1, 23). That does not sound much like a defence of the true faith.

Yet Browne was no atheist. He was a post-atheist: a believer who had returned to faith after a dalliance with unbelief, and had been changed by the experience. The reason he listed all these objections was not to refute them, but to celebrate them: 'Methinks there be not impossibilities enough in Religion for an active faith . . . I love to lose myself in a mystery.' To believe something because you are convinced of it by reason 'is not faith, but persuasion'. He eventually conquered his doubts, he says, not with reasoned arguments, but 'on my knees', in prayer. He came to be convinced that true faith is 'to believe a thing not only above, but contrary to reason, and against the arguments of our proper senses'. And he cited Tertullian: 'It is certain, because it is impossible' (Browne 1964, 9, 20).

Montaigne, Chillingworth, and Browne demonstrate both the power and the limits of the unbelief of uncertainty. For although their faith was shaken and they met something their age called atheism within themselves, they all remained believers. Montaigne surrendered to uncertainty, accepting that once he had doubted everything, including his own doubts, there was nothing left but to embrace the ancient faith. Chillingworth reached an uneasy truce with uncertainty, recognizing that absolute truth was beyond his grasp, and so making the best of the shaky and inadequate truths which a shaky and inadequate human mind can grasp. Browne joyfully embraced uncertainty, believing all the more strongly precisely because faith is out of the reach of human reason.

The poet John Donne, a convert to Protestantism who never left his cradle Catholicism entirely behind him, had this advice in his *Satire III* for anyone unsure when to be credulous and when to be incredulous:

> . . . Doubt wisely; in strange way
> To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;
> To sleep, or run wrong, is. On a huge hill,
> Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
> Reach her, about must and about must go,
> And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.

It could be done, as Montaigne, Chillingworth, and Browne showed. But keeping steady on the cragged and steep path demanded nimble footwork and a cool head.

As our final witness reminds us, however, a cool head is not enough. The French philosopher, mathematician, and mystic Blaise Pascal takes us to the transition from Reformation to Enlightenment. Pascal spent much of the last decade of his life preparing a treatise against atheism, whose disordered fragments were published posthumously under the bland title *Pensées*.

A dominant theme of these 'thoughts' is the futility of argument about the being or nonbeing of God. Philosophical proofs 'are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact', even if you could be sure of the reliability of your own logic. It is philosophers, he points out, who try to deduce God's existence from nature: the Bible never does. Such 'proofs' may be edifying for believers, but telling actual atheists that God is self-evident in nature 'is giving them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble . . . Nothing is more likely to bring it into contempt in their eyes' (Pascal 1995, 57, 237).

He is not claiming that nature proves there is *not* a God. It is worse than that: nature is ambiguous. It gives us 'too much to deny and not enough to affirm', and so leaving us merely with 'doubt and anxiety'. For Pascal, those lost in this trackless desert should give up their doomed mirage-chasing and wait for their only hope of escape – a divine guide:

> We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart . . . Those to whom God has given religious faith by moving their hearts are very fortunate . . . but to those who do not have it we can only give such faith through reasoning, until God gives it by moving their heart, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation.

There is no point, said the mathematical giant of his age, in relying on the 'mathematical mind', which for all its achievements struggles reliably to discern truths. The 'intuitive mind' would have to serve instead (Pascal 1995, 29, 134–5, 182).

Pascal, then, simply vaults over uncertainty. One either sees God or one does not, and this is not a matter of reason but of intuition. And one should not mistake the *post hoc* rationalizations one constructs to defend one's intuitions for genuine and compelling reasons. Argument cannot resolve this matter one way or the other, and anyone who tries to depend on it will end up marooned in insoluble confusion like Bishop Earle's 'sceptick'. It was this impasse that sparked Pascal's notorious wager.

The idea was not original to him, but was first popularized by the radical Protestant rationalist Faustus Socinius. In its crude form, it is a challenge to atheists: if they are right they gain nothing, since there is nothing after death, but if they are wrong they lose everything since they will be eternally damned for blasphemy, so it is more prudent to bet on faith. The problems with this crass argument are immediately obvious, but Pascal had something subtler in mind. He used the wager not to browbeat atheists, but as a thought experiment for those paralysed by the impossibility of certainty. There may or may

not be a God, he conceded: 'But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager?' Maybe you would prefer not to gamble? Too late: once you are born, 'there is no choice, you are already committed'. But although the odds are utterly unknowable, the stakes are not, and so Pascal the mathematician can offer at least one kind of certainty. We are offered the chance to stake something temporary – our earthly lives – for something eternal. And even at vanishingly long odds, a rational gambler would risk any finite stake for a chance of an infinite reward (Pascal 1995, 122–3).

Pascal does not expect anyone to be persuaded by this bloodless argument. After all, he repeatedly emphasizes the futility of argument of any kind. His point is that unbelievers may accept his logic, may even 'want to be cured of unbelief', but even so find that true faith is beyond their reach. In which case, the answer is evidently not 'multiplying proofs of God's existence', but recognizing that 'if you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions'. The wager, then, is a call, not to conversion, but to self-examination. It confronts unbelievers with the fact that even a logically watertight reason to believe would not change their minds. It proves that we are immune to proof. In the end, for believer and unbeliever alike, 'the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing' (Pascal 1995, 124–5, 127).

Pascal framed the problem brilliantly. By its nature, he could not solve it. The legacy of the Reformation for the history of atheism is indeed that, following the collapse of the apparent certainty that accompanied religious uniformity, Europeans were indeed compelled to make religious choices whether they wanted to or not, without having a rock-solid basis on which to make those choices. They might wish to be believers, and they might not have a sophisticated or intellectually plausible atheism available to them, but the situation inescapably opened up a road to unbelief. They were – and we, as their heirs, remain – compelled to wager ourselves on a coin-toss, or set of dice-rolls, which they could not see and at whose odds they could scarcely guess. And so, like any real gambler, they wagered not with their heads but with their hearts and their guts. What alternative is there?

The Reformation era, then, did not become preoccupied with 'atheism' because Christianity suffered an intellectual crisis of credibility, any more than the secular surge of the later twentieth century represented any kind of contemporaneous philosophical breakthrough. The arguments deployed against conventional religion during this period were hackneyed talking

points that would have been familiar in late antiquity. What changed is that they now felt credible, as a matter of intuition; and so, since philosophy abhors a vacuum, sooner or later a Cherbury, or a Hobbes, or a Spinoza was bound to come along to articulate them with new force. Living in an age of broken religious consensus, in which religious choices were forced onto an unwilling population and in which it was impossible to be a believer without also being a sceptic, simply made faithful piety much harder than it had ever been before. Many people – most, even – continued to achieve it, but what had once been as natural as breathing was now a conscious struggle, and that difference opened enough of a crack for the philosophers to drive their wedges into it. It is true that there were few, if any, 'atheists' in the modern sense in the Reformation era. But without the traumas of the Reformation era, 'atheism' in the modern sense would be inconceivable.

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11

Early Modern England

JEFFREY COLLINS

The history of atheism is usually narrated around a watershed separating a modern "speculative" atheism defined with scientific precision from older traditions in which atheism functioned as a pejorative denoting not just godlessness but various forms of heresy and libertinism.[1] According to such accounts, a diffuse tradition of polemical abuse was gradually refined into the defined dogmatism of modern philosophical atheism. Alan Charles Kors influentially argued that medieval and early modern atheism was largely a boogeyman projected by orthodox writers interesting in honing their own apologetical skills. The Cartesian revolution disrupted these orthodox efforts, without adequately replacing their arguments for theism (Kors 1990). A similar timeline is proposed in Michael Buckley's *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, in which he attributes modern atheism to ill-fated Christian apologists attempting to use the new science to prove, rather than deny, God (Buckley 1990). Michael Hunter and David Wootton identify the period from 1680 to 1715 as the "pivotal one in the emergence of atheism" (Hunter and Wotton 1992, 4). In the words of one commentator, in the seventeenth century speculative atheism became a "recognized phenomenon, in a way that was unknown a century earlier. Atheism, it seems, is a feature or symptom of modernity that is traumatically coming to birth" (Hyman 2007, 27).

If this narrative has merit, then early modern England, along with the early modern Dutch Republic and France, was a primary site where this transition was experienced. Of first-order importance were those philosophers who most directly grappled with the potentially negative theological implications of the new science. And while there were many such figures, historical memory has enshrined three above the others as the witting or unwitting progenitors of modern atheism: Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza.

[1] See, for instances, Hunter (1985) and the introduction to Sheppard (2015).

In seventeenth-century England, the subject of this chapter, Thomas Hobbes came to represent the new, more systematic and aggressive form of philosophical atheism. Hobbes, however, was not an avowed atheist, and critiques of him as an implicit atheist (or atheist "by consequence") took diverse forms. His works entered into an intellectual context in which atheism remained a diffuse, under-defined concept. How his philosophy, understood to be allied with that of Spinoza, recast discussion of atheism in England will be considered below. First the initial conditions – the earlier context – must be indicated.

If Hobbes is the face of modern, speculative atheism, a serviceable emblem of the earlier, more indeterminate culture of atheism is Christopher Marlowe, perhaps the most notorious "atheist" in England before the publication of *Leviathan*. Rumors of Marlowe's atheism circulated from the late 1580s. They variously attributed it to blasphemy, heresy, dark magic, Marlowe's politics, and his sexual proclivities. In contemporary tracts his "diabolical atheism" was blamed on his "pestilent Machiavellian policy" or his contempt for holy scripture (Green 1592). In the year of his death, authorities investigating libels accused Marlowe of "vile heretical concepts denying the deity of Jesus Christ our Savior" (*ODNB*). The informer Richard Baines associated his atheism with his supposed addiction to "tobacco and boys," his belief that religion was designed only "to keep men in awe," and his blasphemous opinions of Jesus Christ (including repeated claims that he was the homosexual lover of Saint John). If he was not an atheist, rumor had it, then Marlowe was a papist, which was effectively the same thing.[2]

In short, to the extent that it can be recovered from beneath libelous misinformation, Marlowe's alleged atheism was a scattershot affair. Heresy or blasphemy – disbelief in or mockery of the divine Trinity of Christianity – was sufficient to prove "atheism." So too was moral depravity, which indicated an indifference to God and thus an atheism "by consequence" (i.e. implicitly suggested by such behavior). Marlowe's atheism, the "notablest and wildest articles of Atheism . . . known or read of in any age,"[3] was thus very far from a worked up materialist philosophy, or a rational doubt about God as an ontological phenomenon. Typical of the atheism of the period, it was a "tendency" rather than a "worldview," and it existed chiefly as a prejudicial rumor (Hudson 2014, 16).

[2] BL Harley MS 6848, f. 184–6 (British Library Collections online).
[3] Thomas Drury's characterization. Lambeth Palace Library, Bacon MS 649, f. 246, quoted in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

This promiscuous use of "atheism" as a term of abuse has an ancient history, but conditions of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries encouraged its widespread circulation. The word "atheism" had Greek and (rather late) Latin roots, but it only entered into common English usage in the sixteenth century by way of French and Italian (Shagan 2018, 104–6). Its ancient pedigree informed what was perhaps the first English use of the term "atheist," by John Cheke in an essay appended to his translation into Latin of Plutarch's *On Superstition* (Buckley 1990, 9).[4] In 1555, Miles Coverdale inveighed against "Epicures" and "the Italian atheoi."[5] Several of the earliest printed uses of the term "atheist" appear in Arthur Golding's translations of works by Calvin.[6] The term was an import, but it quickly became a favored one in Anglophone religious polemics of the later sixteenth century.

The Reformation schism and the fear of heresy that it unleashed played a large role in encouraging use of the term (Shagan 2018, 103). So too did the tone of late, Tacitean humanism, which (worryingly to many) rendered fashionable the cynical, instrumental view of religion favored most notoriously by Machiavelli. Humanist responses to the wars of religion also fueled a revival of ancient skepticism, which need not but could cultivate religious doubt (Sheppard 2008, 1–37). The printing revolution enabled an expanding arena of polemical warfare in which accusations of atheism often figured. The opening up of the Americas pressured, for some, the inerrancy of scripture and casual assumptions about the universality of a recognizable theism. Less clear, at this early stage, was the extent to which the stirring "new science" motivated accusations of atheism. Certainly, the new science, the Reformation, and humanism cannot be accused of promoting speculative atheism as a positive principle. Rather, what these political and cultural movements provided was an environment in which tendentious accusations of atheism became increasingly common.

In this context, the accusations against Marlowe were typical in their ambiguity. Thomas Elyot's Latin–English dictionary of 1538 translated "atheos" as "godlessness," but Richard Huloet's of 1552 translated it as "infidel." In sixteenth-century usage atheism could refer to "error, hypocrisy, and other forms of profanity." Apostates and idolaters could be condemned as atheists (Shagan 2018, 105–8). The closest we find to assertions of a speculative

[4] Cheke construed atheism as a denial of providence and as political Machiavellianism.
[5] "Atheist" and "Atheism," *Oxford English Dictionary* (online).
[6] *The sermons of M. John Calvin, upon the Epistle of S. Paule to the Ephesians. Translated from French to English by Arthur Golding* (London, 1577), epistle dedicatory; see also his translation of the *Sermons of Master John Calvin, upon the booke of Job*, "to the reader."

school of atheism in this period were complaints about the revival of "Epicurean atheism" (Ryrie 2019, 23–4). Even this, however, was usually not taken to be a newly assertive and cohesive school of thought but one of many "such confusion of opinions and infinite variety of doctrines, as breedeth in the people a mere paganism, heathenish looseness" (Harding 1565, preface). Often, in fact, complaints about Epicureanism were not directed against its formal ontology (the materialist atomism that seems to prefigure modern atheism), but rather against hedonism (Sheppard 2008, 30–1), or the denial of divine providence (Bradock 1572, chapter 3). This was particularly true after the influential efforts of Pierre Gassendi to protect Epicurean atomism from the charge of atheism (Osler 1994, 36–58).

That disbelief in divine providence, rather than a denial of divinity itself, was a sure mark atheism would remain a commonplace for generations. Where atheism was associated with materialism, materialism was often not construed as an ontological claim but as a base attachment to carnal things, "measuring this life with the present pleasures . . . [judging] nothing holy, good, or worthy to be embraced, but those plausible works and objects of nature, wherewith our eyes and senses are delighted most" (Bell 1578). Such lasciviousness could mark an implicit atheism, or life lived *as if* God did not exist. This was, after all, the suggestion of Psalm 14, where the fool who "said in his heart, there is no God" was condemned essentially for indifferentism and "filthy" living. Discussion of this Psalm, indeed, was a context for some of the earliest English usages of the word "atheist" (*The Psalmes* 1571).

Modern atheists are prone to psychologizing believers. In the early modern world this condescending habit was usually reversed. The denial of God, or providence, or judgment of the immortal soul were understood to be evidences of self-deceit common among the licentious. The "God-less Atheists," versified Samuel Rowlands, embraced the idea of dying like unjudged beasts in order to "eat, drink, be merry, take delight:/ swagger out day, and revel all night" (Rowlands 1604). "O man, thou that thinkest God sees not thy works," intoned one sermonizer, "thou art an Atheist" (Ryrie 2019, 78). Tudor-era complaints about atheism very often blamed it on the ignorance of the vulgar, and the allures of libertinism.[7] The connection between atheism and sexual deviance would be a long-lasting one. Marlowe was only one such case. In the 1630s the Presbyterian Robert Baillie described George Gordon, the marquis of Huntley, as an "effeminate,

[7] See, for instance, Robert Horne to William Cecil, 18 February 1560, *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth, 1558–1589, Vol. 2: 1559–15*, 384.

foolish Atheist" (Laing 1841–2, ii:164). Decades later, John Hoyle, Aphra Behn's lover, was accused of being an "atheist, a sodomite professed, a corrupter of youth and a blasphemer of Christ" (*ODNB*).[8] Incest was a vice very commonly attributed to atheists. Atheists were "ambitious to be like the beasts that perish . . . well content to be annihilated" (Ryrie 2019, 80–2, 85). To the early moderns, it was atheists rather than believers who fashioned convenient metaphysical falsehoods to succor their own crippled psychologies. Writes Alan Charles Kors of this period: "The atheist, it was claimed, could *will* himself into being but could not truly *think* atheistically . . . The atheist, in the Christian portrait, disbelieving God only by his will, sought intellectual justification for that disbelief but could go no further than ignorance and self-contradiction" (Kors 1990, 17).

Again reversing modern polemical patterns, atheists were often not credited with superior rationality but blamed for superstition. This followed in certain respects Plutarch's *On Superstition*, already mentioned, in which superstition was presented as the gateway to atheism (Buckley 1990, 9). Early moderns often understood magic and astrology to represent a "contempt of God, his wisdom and word," and a sure means "to Atheize men" (Brayne 1653, 12–13; Allen 1659). Superstition promoted "profanation" and thus godlessness (Allestree 1667, 311). Credulous reports that people "could transform themselves into greyhounds and into men and women again, and pull down butter and other provision from the air" were often condemned as "atheistical." When courtiers of King Charles blamed witches (rather than providence) for the loss of the royal plate during a voyage to Scotland, they were accused of atheism (Ady 1655, 99, 104).[9]

More commonly still, atheism was conflated with heresy. It was an allegation lobbed between Protestants and Catholics, with the implicit suggestion that either the idolatrous tendencies of the latter or the sacrilegious habits of the former "told" of an implicit and unacknowledged atheism.[10] Mary, Queen of Scots, for instance, condemned the Presbyterian theology provided her in her captivity as atheistic.[11] Marlowe's atheism was often attributed to his rumored "popery." Infidels, particularly Muslims, were also commonly accused of an atheism that clearly did not implicate any

[8] Entry for Thomas Hoyle.

[9] Although skeptics of witchcraft were also accused of atheism. See a defensive John Wagstaffe (1671, preface).

[10] See the characterization of Protestantism in *A Treatise of Treasons against Queen Elizabeth* (1572, 133–7).

[11] Mary to M. Fenaelon, 22 November 1571, *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland, 1509–1603. Vol. 2: 1589–1603*, Appendix 1543–1592, 907.

denial of divinity. More ambiguously, indigenous people of the Americas were not infrequently castigated for "Atheism, gross ignorance, and barbarous behavior" (Settle 1577). Fear of atheism in early modern England could carry xenophobic implications and be directed at foreigners. A single observer of the Restoration period, for instance, denounced atheism as a habit of Italian physicians on the one hand, and as a "French contagion" on the other (Burnet 1688, 143; Burroughs 1665, 121–2).

Contemporaries often considered practical atheism, or disregard of holy things, a latent potential of the vulgar, requiring careful suppression. Lack of care for the fabric of parish churches, warned the clergy of Oxford in 1603, would cause religion to decay and "Atheism and Barbarism and Confusion" to "ensue" (*The Answere* 1603, 29). Atheism could creep up unawares on the intellectually lazy, or exist "in our affections" rather than in engaged reason (Baxter 1660, 140). As Richard Baxter decried, it was possible to "sin oneself into Atheism and Infidelity" (Baxter 1658, preface). Atheism was so understood as an affectation rather than a rational belief because it was commonly thought that belief in God was natural and atheism entirely unnatural, or even a psychological impossibility. Samuel Purchas asserted this, for instance, and wrote that "men will rather worship a Beast . . . than profess no religion at all. The philosophers also that are accused of atheism, for the most part, did not deny religion simply, but that irreligious religion of the Greeks in idolatrous superstition, Socrates rather swearing by a dog, or an oak, than acknowledging such Gods" (Purchas 1613).

Thus, atheism in this period was usually construed either as a base desire that could be willed but not honestly believed, or as an implication of heretical religious beliefs that encouraged unworthy accounts of God without necessarily denying God's existence (Hunter and Wootton 1992, 2). "The ubiquity of atheism and its impossibility," writes Stephen Gaukroger, "were not incompatible, however, because a distinction was made between actually being an atheist and thinking as an atheist" (Gaukroger 2008, 239–40). Even if dismissed as impossible, "the atheist was always a presence in Christian theistic learning" (Kors 2016, 1).

Late humanism, and the rise of *politique* perspectives on religious governance in both France and England, also encouraged accusations of a practical atheism against theorists, statesmen, and monarchs who privileged power over piety. Tolerationist policies were regularly swept up in these indictments. Protestants accused the Valois monarchs, for instance, of permitting "the open exercise of Turkism, Arianism, Judaism, Papism, Anabaptism, and such monstrous professions besides the truth of Christ's Gospel." Such

indulgence marked the depravity of a court "where Machiavel is their New Testament and Atheism is their religion" (Stubbes 1579). Queen Elizabeth, who disappointed Catholics but likewise appeared as a *politique* trimmer to Protestant reformers, was regularly accused of atheism by both of these parties (*Calendar of State Papers: Elizabeth,* 23). The label, in these contexts, served to condemn monarchs and ministers who sacrificed godly duty to statecraft, a vice sometimes characterized as "Politick" or "state" atheism.[12] Oliver Cromwell, saturated though he was with religiosity, would be relentlessly charged with this offense. So too were leading aristocrats of the Restoration court, such as the Earl of Shaftesbury and the Marquis of Halifax. Leading churchmen such as John Tillotson considered it part of the "Atheist's creed" that religion itself was a "Trick of Policy" (Sheppard 2008, 85). But again, the suggestion in these cases was that politics was being conducted "without God" or a due regard for the things of God, rather than that politicians were denying God's existence as a matter of conviction.

All of these threads were drawn together in what is surely the most famous comment on atheism emerging from the early seventeenth century: Francis Bacon's brief essay "Of Atheism," which appeared in the expanded 1612 edition of his *Essays* and was republished throughout the century. Bacon presented atheism as a denial of providence and traced it to the ancient atomists, but he felt that the "frame" of nature so obviously demonstrated God's existence that atheism was "rather in the lip than in the heart of man." It was, he argued, an affectation: the self-proclaimed atheist willed to believe what was impossible. Theism was universal, even among "the Indians of the west." The "contemplative atheist" of antiquity usually rejected only "a received religion or superstition" and were for that reason "branded with the name of atheists" by traditionalists. Thus, when Bacon went on to inventory the "causes of atheism," we can presume he meant to explain affected atheism or baseless accusations of atheism. These, he argued, were attributable to corrupt priests, popular scoffing at "holy matters," peace and prosperity (which distracted men from religion), and – most tellingly – "divisions in religion, if they be many; for any one main division added zeal to both sides; but many divisions introduce atheism" (Bacon 1612a, 371–3).[13] With this neat distinction, Bacon implicitly acquitted the English Reformation of promoting disbelief, but convicted reforming zealots and nonconformists for the offense. The contribution of

[12] See William Younge (1663), targeting Hugh Peters.

[13] In his essay "Of Superstition," Bacon suggested that the atheist was one who had "no opinion of God at all" (Bacon 1612b, 373).

sectarianism to the growth of atheism would become an obsession in the coming century.

One need not accept Lucien Febvre's thesis that atheism was effectively impossible in early modern culture to see that an era of religious division governed by *politique* statecraft produced a fear of atheism out of all proportion to the actual threat of unbelief. What open expressions of atheism we can unearth tend to emerge from rumors, malicious informants, and trial records that are difficult to evaluate. The rarity of open godlessness is indicated by the popular category of "secret atheists." William Vaughan, for instance, acknowledged the existence of "outward Atheists" (whom he conflated with pantheists), but was more concerned with the:

> inward Atheist . . . he, that slyly carrieth the countenance of a sheep, and yet is no sheep, but a sheep-biter. He swalloweth up advowsons, hospitals, and other men's goods under pretense of simplicity. He raiseth rents, encloseth commons, and enhanceth the price of corn. With his wool or wealth he useth to snarl and deceive honest-minded men, whom at length he notwithstanding having Scripture in his mouth snatcheth at most greedily, and clappeth in irons. (Vaughan 1600)

This definition of atheism as greed and hypocrisy bears no resemblance to modern notions. But Vaughan also associated atheism with heedless curiosity about the secrets of nature, with ancient skepticism, with Machiavelli's dictum that "heathenish religion made men courageous, while our religion makes men fearful," and with a licentiousness explicitly exemplified by Marlowe (Vaughan 1600).

Vaughan's paranoia about inward or secret atheism was not atypical. The open avowal of heresy and blasphemy, and certainly explicit godlessness, were widely understood to be common law offenses and were also prohibited by statutes (if only implicitly) (Banner 1998, 29–31; Cromartie 2005, xlv–xlix). Publication of atheistic views was, so far as is known, unheard of, and even the verbal expression of atheism was exceedingly rare (Hunter 1984, 136–7). It has been claimed that the first open avowal of atheism in English was not printed until 1782 (Turner 1782). It was necessarily a secret vice. Elizabeth Walker captured these dynamic in her memoirs, where she confessed with remarkable candor to youthful doubts about the existence of God. These she kept closely guarded, lest "I should hear Books and Ballads cried of me in the Streets" (Walker 1694, 19–20).

Given these conditions, atheism necessarily circulated in secret, or so contemporaries feared. There existed open atheists, wrote the minister Phineas Fletcher, but "more in their deeds proclaim their Atheism of heart,

or else closely deceiving others, and many times themselves (as those *Scribes* and *Pharisees* hypocrites) under profession of religion bury a dead and rotten heart" (Fletcher 1632, 21). Such suspicions spawned recurrent fears of atheistic factions and secret cohorts. Marlowe was supposedly part of one. Sir Walter Raleigh – it was dubiously alleged – was part of a "school of atheism" that included Thomas Harriot and Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland (Webb 1969, 10–18; *ODNB*). A group of Interregnum republicans including Thomas May and Henry Neville were rumored to have been atheists (Wood 1691).[14] After the Restoration, the dissipated Earl of Rochester supposedly presided over a cohort of atheistic courtiers. In his funeral sermon for the earl, Robert Parsons recounted Rochester saying: "One day at an Atheistical Meeting, at a person of Quality's, I undertook to manage the Cause, and was the principal Disputant against God and Piety, and for my performances received the applause of the whole company; upon which my mind was terribly struck" (Parsons 1680, 23). Rochester's was a famous conversion, of course, and either the earl in his deathbed confession or Parsons in his sermon may have been gilding the lily here. On the other hand, Rochester lived through the age of Hobbism, and there was a fashion for irreligion à la Hobbes in the late decades of the century. John Edwards (John Locke's critic) would later claim knowledge of atheistic "Cabals and Assemblies." He reported, incredibly, unnamed Londoners who acknowledged to him a secret society. "Mr. Hobbes is their Great Master and Law-giver," their sole object of "reverence" (Edwards 1695, 128–30). Hobbes, as we shall see, single-handedly augmented the national panic over atheism and significantly altered its presumed philosophical implications. But the agitated critics of Hobbesian atheism borrowed tropes of "secret cabals and assemblies" that were much older. Throughout the era, both before and after the Hobbesian watershed, atheism was almost never openly avowed and yet was an object of incessant concern. Fears about "secret" atheistic circles and conspiracies were the natural result of that paradox.

The circulation of the language of atheism can be roughly quantified. The *Early English Books* database finds "atheism" or "atheist" in only six texts published in the 1560s, or 0.4 percent of all titles printed in that decade (and included in the database). From there, by decade, those words occur in 2.5 percent of all titles (1570s), 6.3 percent (1580s), 8.1 percent (1590s), and then, for 1600–9, fully 10.5 percent of all titles in the database (in 470 of 4465 titles). Across the seventeenth century, the percentage of cataloged titles

[14] See entry on William Davenant.

mentioning "atheism" or "atheist" remained relatively stable at 7–9 percent. The exceptional decade was the 1640s, when only 3.8 percent of the works in *Early English Books* included the terminology of atheism. This dip, however, is almost certainly an optical illusion created by the sheer number of works printed during the civil wars, most of which were brief and designed to circulate news. Even so, more than 1000 civil war publications referred to atheism or atheists. The vast majority, probably all, of these mentions were pejorative. Concern over atheism remained high throughout the Restoration and peaked in the 1690s, when it made some mark on the text of nearly 1500 publications (or 8.9 percent of all titles). It seems certain that the odds of encountering discussion of atheism (albeit entirely hostile discussion) in a printed work were far higher in the seventeenth century than they are today.

Rising concern can also be charted in legislative efforts. Atheism would certainly have been covered by the common law and by Reformation statutes against heresy and blasphemy (denial of the being or providence of God was considered blasphemous). However, and revealingly, medieval and sixteenth-century laws did not explicitly deploy what was then the fairly new language of "atheism"; they instead fixated on heresy. This is true of the heresy laws of Henry V, Richard II, and Henry VIII (which were repealed by King Edward, reinstated by Queen Mary, and repealed again under Elizabeth). It is also true of the law authorizing the Elizabethan Court of High Commission, which targeted "Erroures, Heresies, Schism, abuses, or enormities," but atheism only implicitly (*The Statues* 1810–28, iv, pt. 1:354).

The first statutes considered or passed which explicitly targeted atheism appeared during the civil war. The 1648 parliamentary ordinance for punishing "Blasphemies and Heresies" specifically outlawed (among other offenses) "Preaching, Teaching, Printing, or Writing . . . that there is no God." The title of the Commonwealth's 1650 law, usually known as the Blasphemy Act, also included "Atheistical Opinions" in its title and provisions, seemingly the first time that a law used this specific term (*Acts and Ordinance* 1911, i: 1133, ii: 409–12). From this point on, across the parliamentary debates of the Interregnum and Restoration eras, atheism was condemned alongside heresy and blasphemy as a matter of course. It was an enumerated exception to the liberty of conscience provided by the *Humble Petition and Advice*, which formed the Cromwellian Protectorate (*Diary of Thomas Burton* 1828, cxiv). Parliamentary bills debated in 1667–8, 1678, and 1680 targeted "atheism and profaneness," with (as we shall see) Thomas Hobbes in mind as a primary target (Parkin 2013, 421–51). The 1677 law banning the writs *de Heretico Comburendo* that had authorized the burning of heretics since 1401

nevertheless maintained the bishops' authority to adjudicated "cases of Atheism, Blasphemy, Heresy or Schism, and other damnable Doctrines and Opinions" (*The Statues* 1810–28, v: 850).

There are two possible readings of this statutory history, both likely true in part. First, the failure of pre-civil war laws to explicitly outlaw atheism, and the regular effort to do so thereafter, may reflect a perceived or real growth in atheistic beliefs during the chaos and division generated during the 1640s. Certainly contemporaries perceived such a development. Petitions to parliament in the 1640s regularly raised the alarm over atheism.[15] The compendious "heresiographies" of the period, produced by panicked clergy and reporting information from around the country, did so as well (Pagitt 1645, 70, 138, 152; Edwards, 1646, 18, 114, 123, *passim*). Wills from the period establishing schools felt the need to explicitly ban masters who might promote "Epicureanism, licentiousness, profaneness, and Atheism."[16] "If all atheists be expelled from" Parliament, one contemporary mordantly exaggerated in 1658, "there will be work enough for new elections" (*A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe* 1742, vii: 616). The fear circulated that the religious individualism unleashed by the wars would encourage the vulgar to "fall from Independency to Anabaptism and Antinomianism, and from Anabaptism to be Seekers, and from Seekers to be Anti-scriptualists, and Sceptics, yea, Blasphemers and Atheists." The new sectarians were of course condemned for heresy and schism, but also increasingly as a new "atheistical generation." Furthermore, it was a standard complaint about the rising cause of free conscience or "universal toleration" that such indulgence would permit open atheism, and perhaps that this atheism would enable a recovery of Roman Catholicism (Edwards 1647, 185, 223, 260, *passim*; Ashurst 1648, 8). Bacon had warned that a plurality of religious sects, more than a single schism, would cultivate atheism. It was a common fear, and orthodox observers of the Interregnum and the Restoration certainly perceived this nightmare to be unfolding (Smith 1992; Shagan, 2018, 110–16; Ryrie, 2019, 106–15).

A further explanation of the sudden spike in official and legal concern about atheism in the 1640s and 1650s might attend not to the quantity of English atheism, but to its quality. The failure of Tudor and early Stuart legislation to specifically enumerate atheism as a banned belief in part reflects a point made above: namely, that atheism was often understood as a species of heresy or blasphemy, or was attributed to moral depravity. No doubt this

[15] *Journal of the House of Lords* (London, 1767–1830), petitions of 29 May 1646 and 29 June 1648, xiii: 337–8; x: 352–3.

[16] See the will of Abraham Colfe, vicar of Lewisham in Lysons (1796, 534–6).

categorical imprecision continued during the civil war, and many accusations of atheism from those years targeted heretical (particularly anti-Trinitarian) beliefs that were suddenly freed from effective censorship. Socinianism generated particular panic. Ephriam Pagitt conflated atheism with mortalism and denial of Christ's resurrection (Pagitt 1645, epistle). Observers of the civil war years continued, as well, to construe atheism as a denial not of God's being but his providence. The providence-fixated Oliver Cromwell himself, for instance, denounced as atheistic those "worldly minded men" who refused to acknowledge God's "instruments" (*His Highness* 1654, 18–19). Atheism was also a charge scattershot at the newly assertive anticlerical thinkers of the Interregnum period (Baxter 1657, 3). Other attacks on the rise of atheism from this era clearly aimed at "practical atheism," at "swarms of *Atheistical monsters* (such at least, whose licentious Practices, and insolent Discourses in Public, do equally declare their wild Ambition to be so accounted)" (Charleton 1652, preface). Practical atheism was an allegation thrown at either radical sects (for moral depravity), or increasingly beleaguered traditionalists (for cold, empty formalism). The free-loving antinomians betrayed no fear of God. The sanctimonious conformist was "clean outwardly," but "inwardly he is full of ignorance of God, and Atheism" (Dell 1646, 7). Not only sectarians, but also high-church Episcopalians, could harbor fears of hypocritical, lifeless formalism. If one's right "reason" were "asleep" during religious practice, Richard Allestree warned, one "may repeat the article every day and yet never the less atheistically" (Allestree 1667, 46). All of this followed patterns familiar for decades.

Nevertheless, the sudden development of a pervasive habit whereby atheism was specifically condemned alongside, and distinct from, heresy and blasphemy is notable. It may well suggest a growing unease about philosophically sophisticated, "speculative" atheism. By the 1640s, atheism was no longer solely a vice of the vulgar and dissolute, a practical atheism of godless behavior. Increasingly, openly "profess't" atheism was feared. This dangerous development was more a figment than a reality, but it was in some quarters associated with elite philosophy and the new science (Charleton 1652, preface). As Jeremiah Burroughs put it, the practical atheism of the "ignorant Sots" was expected. New, he wrote in 1652, was atheism among the "great scholars." A "desperate Atheism" was now hiding beneath "a great deal of knowledge, learning, wit, and parts" (Burroughs 1652, 397). Likewise, Richard Allestree, in 1667, worried that the old, hidden, and shamefaced atheism of the "heart" had been replaced by a new, public, and philosophical atheism seeking "proselytes." And "in that respect our modern [atheists]

surmount all former" (Allestree 1667, 224–5, 313). In short, the divide between antique atheism and modern atheism is not simply an observer's category of historians, but was a distinction drawn by English contemporaries after the middle of the seventeenth century.

In England and elsewhere, Hobbes became the public face of this alleged new cultural turn toward aggressive, speculative atheism. He was ranked as the most godless of the promoters of the new science, and the theological implications of natural philosophy were centrally implicated in the rise of "modern atheism." It was in the Restoration, indeed, that the telling phrase "modern atheism" began to circulate in English.[17] Of course, most natural philosophers were not atheists and, as revisionist scholarship of the Scientific Revolution has made clear, the new science did not usually carry atheistic implications. Shrewd commentators have argued, to be sure, that despite their sincere piety scientific giants such as Boyle and Newton abandoned the strongest arguments for theism and drove Christian apologists toward vulnerable "design" arguments for God.[18] These eventually collapsed when philosophers interested in purely material and efficient causality dispensed with the "hypothesis" of God (to borrow the quip of Pierre-Simon Laplace). However, the process by which "science sloughed off the religious ideologies that gave it its rationale" and "took upon itself the mantle of religion" was an eighteenth-century, or even nineteenth-century development (Gaukroger 2008, 24). In seventeenth-century England, virtually all leading natural philosophers were keenly interested in fending off the charge that the experimental method and a methodological materialism (for scientific purposes) necessarily cultivated atheism (Iliffe 2017, 88–90, 102, 195). Robert Boyle was only the most famous such figure. The aspiration to advance a Christian version of the new science became an institutional one. The Royal Society embodied it, as did the Boyle Lectures (funded by Robert Boyle's will) for "proving the Christian Religion against notorious Infidels, Atheists, Theists, Pagans, Jews, and Mahometans" (Hunter 1994, 241).

Boyle's defensiveness, and that of others, had everything to do with Hobbes and Spinoza. Modern mythologies of science and religion in perpetual combat tend to fixate on the challenge to scriptural and papal infallibility posed by the Copernican Revolution, with the travails of Galileo serving as the paradigmatic moment. Tensions over Copernicanism were by no means confined to Catholic countries, but they do not seem to have played a large

[17] In addition to Allestree, see Cudworth (1678), Smith (1675, 123, 137), Sault (1693), and Sharrock (1673, 195).

[18] The argument of Buckley (1990).

role in generating anxiety over atheism in England. Interestingly, rumors of atheism did cloud the reputation of physicians (Ryrie 2019, 26–31). A medieval proverb accounted two of every three physicians as atheists. Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* of 1635 was in part written to counter such notions. Something about the immediacy of the physicians' quest for material causes, and their willingness to "desecrate" corpses in search of them, struck the early modern imagination as particularly disrespectful to divine causality. In England, the belief that physicians "encroach[ed] upon the rights of the author of nature" dated back to at least John of Salisbury. Medicine was commonly associated with the worldly pagan Aristotle (rather than the more readily Christianized Plato), with the potentially atheistic Galen, and with black magic and astrology (Kocher 1947, 229–49). Paracelsan innovators not infrequently adopted this line of attack on the existing medical establishment (Bostocke 1585, chapter 15). Individual physicians of prominence, such as Huntingdon Plumtre, were occasionally accused of being "professed atheists," albeit usually by unreliable critics (Hutchinson 1863, 52, 133).

However, the gravest challenge to Christian theology, and potentially to theism itself, would arise from the new mechanical philosophy, and the temptation to elevate its materialist methodology into a metaphysics. The most powerful blow against the old Christian–Aristotelian synthesis was struck not by the astronomers,[19] but by advocates of what Boyle would later call "corpuscularianism." Either in Cartesian form, where matter was considered infinitely divisible, or in a more ancient form according to which atoms were irreducible, corpuscularianism accounted for all existing material, its movement and change, in terms of microscopic matter. The micro accounted for the macro, and suggested hidden material laws – uniform, and susceptible to mathematical analysis – that would sweep away the old apparatus of form, essence, and accident, an apparatus which was in any case tottering under the weight of philosophical skepticism. What instead emerged was a science of matter in motion according to which all observed phenomena could be explained mechanically.

God's role in such a universe was to enliven and introduce motion into undifferentiated, inert matter. One might account for God, as Descartes did, by positing a parallel spiritual realm. Alongside the human body existed a non-corporeal soul, where resided the thinking and perceiving powers of the mind. Likewise, God existed as an animating spirit. Hobbes was bolder and more reductive. His ontology was entirely materialistic and dismissed

[19] Though Edmund Halley's career was impeded by rumors of atheism (Schaffer 1977).

the existence of non-corporeal entities as a contradiction. The soul, and God itself, must therefore be corporeal, in God's case – according to Hobbes – an extremely subtle, fluid-like matter (Hobbes 1682, 27–32, 36).

Hobbes's material God did not impress Descartes, but it positively outraged most clergymen, so dramatically did it upset classic Christian accounts of God and the soul (Springborg 2012). It also outraged, it must be reiterated, most natural philosophers. Boyle, Joseph Glanville, Thomas Sprat, and the other grandees of the Royal Society rallied against it, in the sincere belief that a proper science of material things "is so far from drawing [the philosopher] to oppose invisible Beings, that it rather puts his thoughts into an excellent good capacity to believe them." The miraculous order achieved by "numberless particles" surpassed – and thus rendered more believable – "what the Scripture related of the Purity of God, of the Spirituality of his Nature, and that of Angels, and the Souls of men."[20] Such confidence inspired Boyle's vision of *The Christian Virtuoso*, who would demonstrate that "by being addicted to experimental philosophy, a man is rather assisted, than indisposed, to be a good Christian" (Hunter 1994, 200–2).[21]

The Christian virtuosi would hold sway throughout the later seventeenth century, but their restlessness to make their case betrayed uncomfortable realities. In either its Hobbesian or Cartesian variations, the new mechanistic philosophy had the potential to minimize God's providential operations in the world. The new science relentlessly sought regular material explanations of matter and change. It fixated on "material" and "efficient" causation, and in so doing achieved great explanatory breakthroughs about the behavior of matter. As a first principle the new science dispensed with the old Aristotelian-scholastic notion of "formal" causes (the idea that everything was "caused" to act in a way required by the essence of what it was). More ambiguous was the question of a "final cause" or telos. That individual objects had natural ends was broadly rejected by the new mechanistic philosophers. Many still believed, nevertheless, that the whole system of creation drove toward a final purpose, and that the intricacy of its design revealed an imperfectly understood divine plan. This notion, however, was rendered newly vulnerable by the mechanistic philosophy. Hobbes bit the bullet and avowed that the divine "first cause" was merely the

[20] Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, quoted in Gaukroger (2008, 225).
[21] For Bacon as an inspirer of Christian "virtuosity," see Nuovo (2017, 9–13).

first in a chronological series of efficient causes, rather than the abiding, sustaining cause of all order and change (Hobbes 2012, 160).

Materialism was not the only reason that Hobbes was accused of atheism, to be sure. The first printed accusation of atheism against him seems to date to 1653, but private accusations pre-dated the publication of *Leviathan* and "many" were leveled at *De Cive* (1642) (Hobbes 1998, 164). In that context, Hobbes was condemned as godless for his extreme subordination of the church to political power (in the manner of Machiavelli), and particularly for his refusal to categorize theism as a natural law. Those of the "opinion that God does not exist" were guilty of "imprudence or ignorance" but not natural "injustice." Hobbes, defending himself, dug in and attributed atheism to those who habitually pursued "pleasure, wealth, and honors" (Hobbes 1998, 163–4). Others of the period seem to have understood atheism as an implication of Hobbes's denial of divinely sanctioned political legitimacy (which rendered him subservient to the usurper Cromwell). Others imprecisely characterized his theological heresies as godless, as Henry Hammond did when he condemned Hobbes for a "farrago of Christian atheism" (Tuck 1992, 114–18). In *De Corpore* and elsewhere, Hobbes seemed to cast doubt on the notion of a created universe, which was another opinion commonly associated with atheism (Jesseph 2002, 151–2). Hobbes, as argued above, entered into a polemical context that deployed "atheism" as a catch-all term of polemical abuse.

However, as Hobbes made clear in numerous self-apologias dating to the Restoration period, it was *Leviathan* that was most regularly accused of "heresy and atheism" (Hobbes 1679, 9; Hobbes 2012, 1226). The work played an outsized role in fueling official concern, and all of the statutes passed or considered in the 1650s, 1660s, and 1670s for specifically banning atheism made explicit reference to it.[22] While many aspects of *Leviathan* offended orthodox sensibilities, it was the implications of Hobbes's materialism that most commonly informed condemnations of his atheism specifically. Indeed, Hobbes tended to most boldly dismiss traditional proofs of God in his natural philosophical works, such as *De Corpore* (1655), and his manuscript critique of Thomas White's *De Mundo* (Hobbes 1976, 305; Jesseph 2002, 151–2). *Leviathan* contained a great deal of this materialist natural philosophy, and a desire to save materialism informed many of Hobbes's most notorious heterodox doctrines: including his mortalism, his account of the Trinity, and his denial

[22] This section borrows from Collins (2014).

of non-corporeal spirits, including the human soul and God himself (who was rendered a thin, fluid "body") (Hobbes 1682, 27–32, 36).

Leviathan, in short, laid bare the logic that might draw a materialist toward heresy and atheism. This was why it so concerned Boyle and his allies. All of Hobbes's leading clerical critics, from John Wallis to Bishop Bramhall, identified his denial of "incorporeal substance" as his most dangerous doctrine, one that would undermine faith in the soul and "the great and good God himself." Wrote Bramhall: "That there is no incorporeal spirit, is that main root of Atheism, from which so many lesser branches are daily sprouting up" (Jesseph 1999, 311–15). So too the first Boyle lecturer, Richard Bentley, condemned "Tom Hobbes" for the nonsensical "Cabbala" of "a corporeal infinite God" (Parkin 2007, 323–4, 393). Boyle himself seems to have targeted Hobbes when he condemned those who perhaps insincerely "profess[ed] Christianity" but would "have God to be a body" (MacIntosh 2005, 146). To be sure, other grounds for Hobbes's atheism continued to be identified: his denial of providence, his defective account of natural law, his idolization of the state, the supposed licentiousness of his followers (Collins 2014, 39–41). But amid this cacophony, one strain of critique sounded more clearly and consistently than the others: condemnation of Hobbes's materialism, of his godless version of the new science. This doctrine was the dangerous core of "modern atheism," of the brazen, speculative atheism of the philosophers. The notion that "God was Almighty Matter" would serve to link Hobbes and Spinoza (*The Last* 1680). Together, their scriptural criticism and natural philosophy would influence the so-called "deists" of the 1690s, who were regularly condemned for atheism. They would also influence the openly atheistic figures of the French Enlightenment, such as d'Holbach, Naigeon, and Diderot (Kors 1992, 282). These figures, ironically, were also influenced to consider the possibility of a systematic atheism by those orthodox philosophers who had, in the seventeenth century, constructed such systems as foils for refutation.[23] By the eighteenth century, philosophical histories of godlessness had come to habitually (and usually indignantly) identify Hobbes and Spinoza as the "fathers" of atheism (Malcolm 2002, 481). It is thus a simplification, but only a slight one, to suggest that the publication of *Leviathan* marked the precise tipping point between the ancient and modern notions of atheism. In that work, perhaps for the first time, did atheism arguably emerge as an implication of a systematic treatment of ontology, anthropology, and theology. Thus was born the worldview of the speculative, scientific atheist.

[23] For Henry More's role in this process, see Leech (2013, 1–10).

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12

Spinoza and the Low Countries

HENRI KROP

In letter 30, Spinoza states that he intends to write a treatise that would bring to a close the endless stream of accusations of atheism made by common people. Five years later, in 1670, the treatise known as the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP) was published anonymously. However, one could argue that the TTP takes the existence of God for granted. Spinoza berates men who only know God inadequately 'through created things, of which they know not the causes' and who accuse of atheism philosophers in possession of real knowledge of God. Such men believe in miracles, which, being 'in contravention to God's nature and laws', inevitably 'leads them to atheism'. But Spinoza's attempt to turn the tables did not convince the radical Cartesian Lambert van Velthuysen (1622–85), whose critique of the TTP in letter 42 deals with three main topics, which all seem to imply more than atheism.

Van Velthuysen begins by examining Spinoza's conception of God, maker of nature, but this God is not a person. His will and intellect differ only in name, but are in fact identical. Such a God is unable to create another universe, van Velthuysen argues, because He cannot conceive a universe which is different from ours. Hence, all events in this world are necessary and can in principle be known as 'eternal truths'. Apparently Spinoza rejected the Cartesian doctrine of the creation of eternal truths. Since Spinoza's God exercises power conforming to the laws of nature, miracles are impossible. Moreover, a miracle is only an unusual event of which the cause is unknown. Van Velthuysen picks up this argument by observing that Spinoza 'taught the fatalistic necessity of things'.

Second, Spinoza as 'deist' undermines the philosophical foundations of religion. Van Velthuysen states that by rejecting superstition Spinoza 'cast off all religion' and made all religious worship inane. The consequence of this concept of God seems to be the end of all morality, because divine commandments provided by either the Bible or nature are no longer conceivable

and merely a product of human imagination. All Holy Scripture exhorts men to virtue inspiring hope of reward and fear of punishment, but readers who 'consider nature truly' will not be able to take such arguments seriously.

Third, Spinoza's argument implies that 'revelation' is, taken as such, false and cannot be studied by means of reason. Van Velthuysen opposes Spinoza's view equating religion and morality, because by this reasoning all religions would be at least functionally equivalent. Among all nations we find oracles, inspiring men to acquire moral virtues. At the end of his letter, van Velthuysen concludes that Spinoza 'secretly' and 'with hidden and disguised' arguments introduced 'pure' atheism. Due to his concept of God, he undermines worship and therefore religion and maintains that revelation in all religious traditions is in itself 'false'.

Spinoza reacted furiously to this renewed accusation of atheism. In the manuscript version of letter 43, which is extant, he accused van Velthuysen of 'superstition' and 'malignity', and he compared him with Voetius, who slandered Descartes. In the printed text of this letter, Spinoza observed that all these accusations of atheism are pointless in light of his own strong moral character, and that he did not 'inordinately desire', as all atheists do, 'honours and riches'. In the second part of his argument, Spinoza tried to establish the reconcilability of true religion with his concept of God by alluding to the *Ethics,* which (re)defined 'religion' as love of God in which our highest felicity and salvation consists (E5p36s). In line with *Ethics* 1def7 he also distinguishes between 'determinism' and fatalism. Spinoza introduced the notion of *Deus sive nature* by implicitly accepting van Velthuysen's observation that Spinoza's necessitism is 'the same or not very different' from saying that 'the universe is God'. Finally, the philosopher accepted van Velthuysen's argument about Holy Scripture. If the 'holy writings' of Muslims or pagans contribute to justice and charity, such people will be 'saved', notwithstanding their misconceptions about God.

Notwithstanding this harsh controversy, van Velthuysen and Spinoza shared the notion of atheism current in the seventeenth century. Both used the concept to slander opponents and denounce 'false' concepts of God, which precluded 'true religion', and neither adopted 'atheism' in the modern sense of the word. There is ample evidence that during his lifetime the nature of Spinoza's thought provoked heated controversy. The debate over whether he was an atheist continues to this day, because the vast majority of the people in the Low Countries were religious right up to the 1960s.

The first part of this chapter consists of three sections, which examine these historical controversies and the corresponding evolution of the concept

of atheism in the Netherlands. The second part will return to Spinoza and deal with the question of in what sense historians may deem him an atheist.

Seventeenth-century philosophical dictionaries scarily mention 'atheism' or 'atheist'. Only Micraelius' *Lexicon Philosophicum* (1662) briefly notes that atheists 'have no piety', just like 'pagans who did not worship idols'. According to Hackspan's *Termini* (1664), atheism consists of 'contempt of God', and he outlines a multilayered conception comprising four kinds of 'atheists'.

However, in 1639, Voetius, the Utrecht professor of theology, developed a full-blown theory in four elaborate disputations. In the seventeenth century all discussion of the 'atheism problem' remained caught in their *'Distinktionsschemata'* (Barth 1971, 77). The author starts by observing that the word 'atheism' is often used to slander opponents, as the pagans already did, who denounced the first Christians for deviating from traditional religion. The positive definition of an atheist provided by Voetius hereafter is 'someone who directly or indirectly eradicates from himself or from others the knowledge, faith or worship of God' (Voetius 1648, 116). The disputation continues, listing six synonyms: fools (who say in their heart 'there is no God,' – see Psalm 14:1, a verse already quoted by St. Anselm), Epicureans, libertines, *esprits forts*, Machiavellians, and deists. The definition implies the existence of three kinds of atheists: (1) people who do not acknowledge a god at all; (2) persons who worship fictitious gods; and (3) people who acknowledge the true God, but not as He is, but as they imagine Him to be. In a Scholastic manner the first disputation continues by making further distinctions. We have 'participated' atheism, if someone by order or permission takes part in another's sin of atheism. However, according to Mersenne, Voetius' predecessor in this respect, this is not 'true atheism'. According to Voetius, atheism in a proper sense is to be divided into direct and indirect atheism. An indirect atheist is someone who as a necessary consequence of his assertions or actions eradicates all knowledge of God.

A practical indirect atheist is someone who deems all worship to be useless (i.e. deists) or does not practice true religion, such as pagans, Muslims, Jews, and heretics. A practical atheist is also someone who does not in word, but by his way of life and morality, reject religion and deny God. We explicitly came across this form of practical atheism in the first section of Spinoza's letter 43, and it makes his refutation of atheism by referring to his morality moreover fully comprehensible.

Theoretical indirect atheism is further divided into two kinds. In the first case the existence of God is denied by immediate consequence. Such an

atheist may deny an attribute of God (e.g. providence or justice) as an Epicurean does. Or he may deny a basic principle of religion, such as Scripture, like the Roman Catholics. Or he will reject the natural light of reason as the sceptics do. In the second case of indirect atheism the consequence is indirect – for example, if God's immutability or immensity is objected to, it precludes correct knowledge of God.

In order to understand Voetius' main thesis that a simple denial of God's existence (i.e. atheism in the modern sense of the word) is inconceivable, we have to take his treatment of the causes of atheism into account. The main cause is Adam's Fall, which darkened man's intellect and corrupted his will. However, we remain created in God's image, which is never fully eradicated. Hence, there is a natural innate 'theology' according to the Utrecht theologian. Voetius cites Romans 1:18 and 2:15 as proof that we are provided with innate notions, which are the natural seed of religion and reason, as pagan philosophers such as Seneca, Aristotle, and Cicero acknowledge. In adults, this potential knowledge of God becomes actual and as obvious as other principles such as 'the whole is greater than its part'. This 'innate' knowledge of God is paired with a theology, which we acquire by using our senses and our intellect in philosophy. This acquired natural theology is unproblematic and 'few deny its existence'. However, the existence of innate knowledge of God is rejected by 'Socinians' and sceptics, who deny the evidence of first principles, and seems to be irreconcilable with Aristotelianism, which teaches that the mind is a *tabula rasa*. According to Voetius, these innate notions develop from reason itself. The intellect is able to know first principles and the existence of God without any effort or much reasoning. He compares the intellect with a healthy eye, which must see an object if light is present. Hence a man cannot be without innate theology, just as he cannot be without rationality (Voetius 1648, 140–3).

Notwithstanding the scholastic nature of Voetius' disputation written in the 1630s, Spinoza and his contemporaries embraced a similar concept of atheism. A philosopher's denial of the existence of God is as inconceivable to them as it was to St. Anselm. Therefore, Spinoza took the existence of God for granted, and only denounced *false* concepts of God. Due to the different notion of atheism, their controversies are only indirectly relevant now.

In the Low Countries, Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) restarted the debate. In his seminal work *The Historical and Critical Dictionary*, which underwent at least five editions after its first publication in 1697, he devoted a complex entry to the life and works of Spinoza. Numbering over 25 folio pages, it is the longest item of his dictionary and underscores Bayle's thought and focus on Spinoza's

atheism. This section of the chapter consists of three parts. It will outline Bayle's redefinition of theoretical atheism as monism and examine the way he situates Spinoza's philosophy in the history of thought.

The Huguenot refugee encyclopaedist eliminated Voetius' notion of 'practical atheism' from discussion. In defending tolerance, he severed the traditional link between atheism and immorality. It is well known that Hobbes and Locke excluded atheists from toleration because of the serious danger they purportedly posed to social order. However, in the *Pensées Diverses*, Bayle argued that an ordered society of atheists is possible. History provides ample proof of virtuous atheists such as Epicurus and Lucretius in antiquity and Vanini and Spinoza, the 'greatest atheist ever' in the modern age (Vernière, 1954, 23–33).

Bayle formulates two arguments to support his claim that a moral atheist is possible. The first is that a man does not necessarily live up to his own moral principles. Men are often inconsistent. Bayle refers to Cicero's observations that some Epicureans are 'excellent friends and honourable people', although Epicurus taught that there is no virtue besides the selfish pursuit of lust. The Stoics believe in fatalism, but of all philosophers they most frequently use moral language. Moreover, a different religious doctrine does not necessarily imply a different morality. Bayle gives the example of predestination. Although endorsed by Protestants and Muslims and rejected by Roman Catholics, all faithful may in fact act in the same manner. This implies, Bayle argues, that religion does not necessarily make a man morally strong. An atheist, such as Sultan Mahomet II, committed horrible crimes, but Nero, who had a 'general sense of the Deity', did so too.

A society of atheists is to be compared with a 'commonwealth of pagans', with severe laws and punishments for violations. The denial of God's existence does not render the citizens insensible to passions such as glory and shame. Therefore, some pagans and atheists will act in good faith, help the poor, oppose injustice and renounce bodily pleasures (*Oeuvres Diverses* (OD) III, 109). Moreover, such a society will be more stable, Bayle argues, since an atheist will refrain from disturbing public peace and will not appeal to his conscience against the magistrate, alluding to St. Peter's word: 'We ought to obey God rather than men' (OD III, 87).

The second argument Bayle provides is that someone's morality in general depends on the passions and not on the intellect. General notions of good and evil are not the basis of man's behaviour, but his private judgement on a particular action. Such a judgement 'will almost always follow the reigning passions of his soul' (OD III, 87). Will a wicked Christian refrain from stealing,

Bayle rhetorically asks, because he knows God's commandment, which forbids stealing? Although a religious person possesses a sense of equity, he will act in order to satisfy his desires, notwithstanding his piety and the general principles of the faith he adheres to. The crusaders, for example, whose religious inspiration is beyond doubt, Bayle observes, committed the most heinous crimes, and in the end the Oriental Christians hated them more than they hated the Jews and the Muslims (OD III, 90).

In other words, Christian religion is not required to develop morality. Bayle's historical example is a woman in the streets of Damascus carrying water in one hand and a torch of fire in the other. Asked by the ambassador of St. Louis why, she answered that with the latter she wanted to set fire to Paradise and with the former to extinguish the flames of Hell. Moral life does not expect rewards in an afterlife, and we should worship God only because of the excellence of His nature (OD III, 114). An atheist provided with philosophical reason alone will develop the idea of honour and conclude that only a moral life is worthy of man. The most outstanding example of such an atheist philosopher is Spinoza. In his moral doctrine we find a multitude of good maxims pertaining to the duties of *l'homme honnête*.

At first sight, Bayle's treatment of the speculative atheist also seems to break with Voetian tradition. Apparently there are 'American peoples', who are atheist and completely ignore the existence of God (OD III, 325). Speculative atheism as a rule is the result of a careful examination that balances the pro and con arguments, and reaches the conclusion that the existence of God is problematic. Bayle describes libertines as *'esprits forts'*, men who doubt all things and attempt to answer the arguments produced in order to prove the existence of God. Such sceptics examine the ontological argument of Descartes, as well as Spinoza's arguments that the 'universe is a simple being and that we are modifications of God' (OD III, 112). Therefore, Bayle defines a 'speculative atheist as someone who after a lengthy debate and consideration reaches the conclusion that the existence of God is false or problematic'. Such a man is a hidden atheist, because he wants to live in peace and does not want to forfeit the social privileges related to the reputation of orthodoxy (OD III, 139).

However, all men (i.e. atheist, deists, superstitious people, and orthodox) share the 'general idea of a God, which is a principle of the universe and the mover' (OD III, 222). So, reason induces man to form a notion of God and, therefore, Bayle in defining speculative atheism returns to the traditional lines. An atheist is a man who does not know the *true* God, which implies a genuine worship. A God-concept lacking the notion of providence cannot

support a genuine religion. Bayle's example is the South African Hottentots, who acknowledge a 'sovereign being' but do not worship Him, since He has no knowledge and could not act in another manner. The other example is Spinoza, who acknowledges a God, yet falls into irreligion. For, religion rests on the hope of reward and the fear of punishment, which presupposes a God, whom 'by his intellect knows all things' and 'by his will maintains a certain order in the Universe' (OD III, 330).

Speculative atheism implies naturalism, meaning nature is the cause of all things and exists eternally by itself, and acts in accordance with unchangeable laws, making all events happen with an inevitable 'fatal necessity' (OD III, 400).

Bayle therefore equated (speculative) atheism and Spinozism, and the Age of Enlightenment followed his lead (Mori 1999, 218). The second line of his entry runs: 'Spinoza was a systematic Atheist, and . . . his doctrine was the same as that of several ancient and modern philosophers, both in Europe and Asia.' In remarks A and B Bayle substantiates this claim by listing examples of thinkers, both past and present, who argued that 'the whole universe is, but one substance, and that God and the world are but one Being.' Inductively, Bayle infers from all these positions three principles.

The first is that speculative atheism amounts to 'pantheism'. In the words of the medieval heretic Almaric: 'all things are God, God is all things. Creator and creature are the same' and they 'were one, and all things were God'. Metaphysically the doctrine of the one substance implies that 'all things are essentially God', and that the substantial forms of things are imaginary, and have no real entity. The second principle is that there is a divine power in nature, which can produce all things. Strato, a legendary teacher in the Aristotelian school at Athens, taught a materialist doctrine long before Spinoza, which makes him the Spinoza of Antiquity. The production of the universe is a result of mechanical means, a result of motion and weight. The third principle is that existence of nature is not by chance, as the Atomists taught, but 'necessarily and from all eternity'. Hence, speculative atheism implies determinism. These three principles taken together make Spinozism a consistent philosophy, which underpins 'pantheism', as we will see below.

The system of atheism developed by Spinoza and his predecessors throughout the world, Bayle calls a philosophical hypothesis: it resolves the problems of theism such as creation and theodicy. It also solves the problem of human freedom. The price Spinoza had to pay, Bayle argued, is that the hypothesis of one divine substance runs counter to common sense. Time and again, Bayle refers to basic principles of Aristotelian logic, which Spinoza's

system opposes, such as the distinction between species and individual, and between identity and similitude. According to Aristotelian logic, a mode is so intimately united with its subject that there is a real identity. So if a mode changes into its opposite – a person's black hair becomes white – the subject cannot remain the same. Bayle concludes that Spinoza's unique substance-God, being the subject of all modes, will have to change in the course of time: 'From whence it follows, that the god of the Spinozists is a being actually changing.' Moreover, it is the subject which acts and not a mode. Therefore, if a man is a mode of God, it is not man who acts, but is God who acts. If the proposition 'the Germans have killed ten thousand Turks' is translated in Spinoza's system, it will read: God modified into Germans, killed God modified into ten thousand Turks, which violates the principle of contradiction.

Bayle's criticism underpinned by scholasticism felt bizarre. Some commentators even consider him to be a sympathizer, who propagated atheism by advancing weak arguments against Spinoza. However, unlike Voetius, Bayle does not denounce atheism as unnatural. Philosophers such as Descartes, Epicure, and Aristotle are 'inventors' of conjectures about the causes of some natural phenomena, and the more we study their hypotheses, the more we acknowledge the uncertainty of all philosophical knowledge (OD I, 126).

Among philosophers, 'atheism' seems to have been almost universal. With respect to 'inanimate' nature, Bayle argues, all but a few Cartesians adopt a factual atheism by maintaining that nature in itself contains the true causes of the phenomena. They observe that nature produces plants, animals, minerals, and metals, although it is without intelligence. If Christians argue that natural causation presupposes divine concurrence, it is mere pious fiction, because they acknowledge that only nature itself is the determining cause of the phenomena by its substantial forms. Modern philosophers, who eliminated substantial forms, proposing that local motion is the only true cause of the phenomena, are factual atheists as well. The only real alternative for 'atheism' is the Cartesian hypothesis, which identifies God as the immediate cause of all motion (OD III, 348). In fact, unlike the scholasticism of the European Dominican and Franciscan missionaries, it is only Cartesian theism that would have been new to the atheist philosophers of China. Bayle sums up by stating that 'there are very few ages in which Spinoza's doctrine has not been taught' (1740, Plotin (DHC 1734 IV, 704)). Reversing Voetius' view on speculative atheism, it is theism that has to be accounted for.

At the end of the Enlightenment period the so-called *Spinozismusstreit* (Spinoza controversy) radically changed the dominant view on Spinoza:

the Dutch philosopher morphed into a religious pantheist. In 1785 the German philosopher Jacobi provoked a passionate dispute on Spinozism by revealing that the Enlightenment poet Lessing had secretly been a Spinozist and had endorsed his *Hen kai pan* (the One and the All) (1785, 12). Two years later, the German philosopher Herder observed that people, who shared Lessing's conviction that we 'cannot stand the orthodox concepts of God anymore' had to discredit Bayle's view on Spinoza, and his identification of Spinozism and atheism (1787, 7). In the Netherlands, the first who refused to call Spinoza an atheist was François Hemsterhuis (1721–90), although the main objective of his small oeuvre, as the preface to his *Lettre sur l'homme* (1772) states, is to counter the rising tide of French materialism, which endorsed atheism and refuted the need for religion. In a letter on atheism commissioned by Jacobi, Hemsterhuis traces the history of atheism from Greek atomism onwards. The last form developed after Descartes and the new philosophy uncritically adopted mathematics and discovered the laws of matter. It enthroned lifeless matter, but its error is to identify infinite nature with the finite universe we perceive by means of our senses. According to Hemsterhuis, Spinoza was too much of a genius to endorse this stupidity and, like Epicurus and Lucretius, he acknowledged a power in the universe far superior to his own. Spinoza was in fact a 'theist' and 'felt the presence of the divinity more strongly than a million orthodox Christians'.

In 1780 the Utrecht professor of philosophy and mathematics Hennert (1733–1821) edited the first volume of a new philosophical journal in the vernacular, *Uitgeleezene Verhandelingen over wijsbegeerte en fraaije letteren* (Selected Treatises on Philosophy and Belles Lettres). It is mainly devoted to Spinoza and shows the renewed and growing interest in Spinoza, well before Jacobi sparked off the controversy on Spinoza. Hennert adopted Moses Mendelssohn's notion of a 'reformed Spinozism', which reconciles Spinozism with religion and rejected Bayle's critique. It is ridiculous, he claims, to call the Dutch philosopher an atheist, because atheism was alien to the seventeenth century and only came into being with Toland, d'Holbach, and Hume. Moreover, it is a form of idealism, because Spinoza explains the world by means of the ideas in God's mind. That is why he bases his philosophy on analysis of the Divine nature. Hennert refers to *Ethics* 2p10. Finally, Spinoza's determinism is completely different from the fatalism of ancient and modern materialism, which attempts to explain the natural phenomena by means of motion, but is grounded in the unchanging divine decrees.

In 1799 the Harderwijk professor of philosophy, Nieuhoff (1746–1831), published an essay on Spinozism. According to him, the basis of Spinoza's system is divine freedom (i.e. self-determination). This belief in a free God led Spinoza to the concept of a god as *causa sui* (i.e. 'cause of itself'). From this notion the system proceeds synthetically. The result is a metaphysical dogmatism, which is unique in the history of philosophy. Spinoza is a theist, but his conviction to avoid anthropomorphism at all costs makes him look like an atheist. However, a century later, the view on Spinozism is transformed. His doctrine is the only key to 'elevating truths' and the only way to conceive the infinite divinity adequately (Krop 2005, 207). Entranced by Cartesian metaphysics, Nieuhoff argues, Spinoza's philosophy unwillingly leads to pantheism, because of its view on matter as pure extension. In order to avoid pantheism, and remain consistent with his initial 'theism', we should 'reform' Spinozism in line with Herder's *Gott*. He focuses on Spinoza's idea that God is the only substance, and that all things depend on Him follows with necessity from Him. This growing awareness of the universe's necessity had a religious implication since it increases our sense of humility and offers man consolation and happiness. To Nieuhoff, Spinozism offers an alternative to orthodoxy.

In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, Dutch Spinozism became intertwined with idealism. Both philosophical currents shared an outspoken monism and opposed Kantian dualism. The popularization of idealism in the 1840s coincided with the rise of Dutch Spinozism. In his 1846 inaugural address, 'Philosophy, man reconciling with himself', C. W. Opzoomer (1821–93), the new Utrecht professor, argues that by contemplating nature, primitive mankind developed the notion of an infinite Power, which produced nature. However, primitive man comprehended nature as an endless series of finite causes and effects and was unable to differentiate between his own finitude and the infinite whole. Therefore, man created a God after his own image. The second stage in man's development proceeds to reflection on the origins of his knowledge, and the realization that the power of his mind and all forms of knowledge are basically man-made. Consequently, he finds himself in an unhappy opposition to the world, and this uneasy awareness we find in the development of philosophy between Descartes and Kant. According to the latter we cannot *know* reality itself, nor the Power behind it, and we have to simply believe in its existence. However, man becomes reconciled with reality the moment he realizes that his mind and things are manifestations of the Absolute, which is the infinite All. The first philosopher who argued for this reconciliation was Spinoza, and

we may call his philosophy, therefore, pantheism. According to Opzoomer, Spinoza is the predecessor of Hegel's theory of truth: God is in all and outside God nothing is to be conceived. This implies that the plurality of things in nature is grounded in the unity of the infinite substance, and he rightly distinguishes between the *natura naturata*, the set of all things (*ta panta*) and the *natura naturans*, the *pan* of the Divine substance. According to Opzoomer, Spinoza draws our attention to the fact that we not only cannot conceive of the world without God, as philosophical theology underlined, but that we cannot conceive of God without the world. Without the *modi* and the attributes, God is nothing. It is obvious that this Spinozistic philosophy is unconceivable without a God, and like Hegel and Novalis, Opzoomer regarded Spinoza as being 'full of God'.

The first half of the twentieth century focused both on the 'theocentric' and non-religious nature of Spinoza's thought. W. Meijer (1842–1926), who translated all of Spinoza's works into Dutch, was also the first secretary of the Dutch Spinoza Society (1897) and one of the founding fathers of the international *Societas Spinozana* (1920). According to Meijer, Spinozism is opposed to religion. All attempts by liberal theology in the nineteenth century to reconcile his thought with Christianity are pointless and based on a redefinition of religion, which only led to confusion. It is beyond doubt that according to Spinoza we cannot enter into a personal relationship with the Supreme Being, and we can only love but not serve Him. According to Meijer, Spinoza's philosophy, unlike Kant's, is 'dogmatic' and makes assertions about reality. It is 'theistic'. Reason establishes that there is one interrelated reality expressing itself in an infinite number of ways. The two attributes known to us express the essence of Existence in a different but interrelated way. This implies, Meijer argues, that Spinoza's philosophy is 'pantheistic', a doctrine of 'All being One'. Spinoza was a theologian, and his system does not start with experience, but conceives of all things being part of God. Man, this metaphysics teaches us, does not hold a special place in nature. Spinoza's 'theocentrism' provides the only means to overcome Kantian 'anthropocentrism'.

J. D. Bierens de Haan (1866–1943) studied theology and became active in the Dutch aesthetic movement of the 1880s. After some time he became aware that poetry was in fact lyricism without a philosophical base. In 1900 he left the ministry and established himself as a free teacher of philosophy and literature. The basic principle of his Spinozism is that a philosophy is not *the* philosophy to the exclusion of all others. It is a moment in the eternal development of the spirit. Spinozism, therefore, does not coincide with the

historical doctrine of the Dutch philosopher. Reading Spinoza means reconstructing him.

In the *Ethics*, Bierens de Haan sees a deep fault-line between 'naturalistic pantheism' on the one hand and a moral philosophy on the other, which is rooted in human desire but leads us to God. For Bierens de Haan, Spinoza's metaphysics is of a 'theological' nature, and he situates Spinoza in a tradition which began with Ionic natural philosophy, continued with Aristotle, the Stoa, and on to Calvinist doctrine. The ultimate cause of reality lies in an infinite ground, which in accordance with unchanging laws produces all. This metaphysics does not deny God, but is an acosmism, and by denying the reality of the world, it is in line with pantheism. In 1914, Bierens de Haan adjusted his view of Spinoza's metaphysics and maintained that underlying this static conception of reality there is a more basic dynamic one. In accordance with Heraclitus and Plotinus, the divine ground is a cause, which eternally produces reality, and nature is constantly striving to return to its ground. This principle implies that reality, as such, is not unchanging, but active, and nature is the whole of creative forces. This process of reality is not an evolution to higher levels, but an eternal return to God.

The view of Spinoza as a (pan)theist remained the dominant one until World War II. Even among freethinkers, organized in *De Dageraad* (the Dawn) the debates continued whether Spinoza was an atheist. Only Marxist authors tended to consider him a philosopher, who although he clung to the deist god of the bourgeoisie, was an atheist, a logical consequence of this thought. In 1935, in the *Worldview of Communism*, Dirk Struik (1894–2000) referred to Spinoza as the predecessor of atheist materialism.

But looking back to the second half of the nineteenth century, in 1865, Johannes van Vloten (1818–83) was the first to suggest another reading of the *Ethics*, one which logically implies replacing 'God' by 'connection of all things'. In the concept of 'God' converges the 'Medieval–Christian world view', he argues, but, unlike Descartes, Spinoza 'deconstructs' it in order to develop a more accurate knowledge of reality. Although the *Ethics* still uses 'God', modern readers should not utilize 'the ecclesiastical name of an illusionary being' anymore. Such 'God-talk' will lead to confusion and misunderstanding, he argues. A real understanding of Spinoza is only possible if one, as he himself did in 1846, bids farewell to metaphysics and its ecclesiastical sister, theology. Since Spinoza, these disciplines belong to history, although German idealism and liberal theology attempted to keep them alive along with the intellectual dishonesty of the 'new-fashioned Christianity' of liberal theology, which Van Vloten denounced for the rest

of his life. Theology will inevitably become humanism and religion social work. The Church will disappear, having accomplished its historical mission. In 1849, Van Vloten outlined this progressive vision, and he consequently resigned from the ministry. Modern science, he claims, will fulfil the work Spinoza began, quoting the British Spinozist Pollock.

This view on science is the consequence of Spinoza's epistemology. Knowledge, according to Van Vloten, starts imperfectly with incoherent experience, but by deduction it extends to natural laws, providing deeper insight into the causal interrelatedness of nature. This evolutionary process of the development of natural science has been accomplished; however, in the field of religion and moral science, it still meets resistance. Yet, Spinoza developed a science of morality, which applies natural laws to psychology and morality. His ethics is the first secular morality in history. It replaces the traditional definition of philosophy as a meditation on death, by 'a meditation on life'. This motto was printed on the front-page of *De levensbode* (the messenger of life), a Spinozist journal that Van Vloten edited between 1865 and 1881.

'The coherence of all things' replaces 'God', but it is provided with the attributes of eternity and infinity. It is real and not a Kantian ideal, and, being our highest good, provides tranquillity of the mind and inspires eternal love. The historian might wonder what the difference is between 'the coherence of all things' and the 'pantheistic' God of German idealism, which Van Vloten denounced as 'a morbid doctrine of all deification'. However, his wish to omit 'God' from the *Ethics* turns on the idea that the Christian era came to a close with Spinoza and his philosophy, which teaches mankind how to overcome 'all divisions caused by divine worship'. Consequently, via Van Vloten, Spinoza became the prophet of modern atheism and humanism.

Half a century later, Leo Polak (1880–1941), professor of philosophy at Groningen University, continued the atheist humanism of Van Vloten. From an early age onwards he opposed institutional religion, which is 'inhuman', and will lead to hostility between men. According to Polak, *Ethics* IV propositions 36 and 37 demonstrate that all men guided by reason will share the same 'highest' good and will strive to maintain all that is loved without causing harm to one another. Guided by reason, man recognizes and lives in unity and unanimity. Discord, and disagreement, Polak suggests, come from different affects. This emotional diversity is caused by the imagination. That is why Polak believes he can firmly align himself with what he sees in Spinoza, namely that religions necessarily lead to division among people. The philosophic humanism of Spinoza, however, puts an end to

religious divisiveness and unites mankind. In the 1900s, having discovered Kant, Polak adopted the so-called 'objectivism doctrine', which differentiates between objective moral norms and man's subjective inclinations. It stems from human reason itself. The anti-naturalistic principle Kant discovered made him the 'Annihilator of all metaphysics'.

In the history of human thought, Polak argues, human heteronomy is gradually replaced by human autonomy. Although the Reformation breached the power of the Church over the 'European mind', Descartes was the first individual to acknowledge the creative and emancipatory power of the intellect. His rationalistic method introduced real autonomy. Spinoza, however, surpassed Descartes, and his criticism of revelation and divine worship made morality autonomous. According to Polak, we find in Spinoza an atheistic religion which acknowledges 'eternal values' and a sacrosanct ideal. Apparently, Spinoza still spoke the language of metaphysics, Polak concedes; his ethics is hardly discernible from the heteronomous naturalism of nineteenth-century materialism, but we should not take Spinoza to the letter. His thought is a living and inspiring force, or a 'habit of mind', and the concept of God in his philosophy is only a relic of the past.

Polak's view on Spinoza's atheism is closely related to his own anticlericalism. Divine worship necessarily leads to conflict and division, he argues, because it is based on imagination. Sometimes the New Testament or the Talmud, he concedes, inspired the faithful to morality, but Spinoza was the first philosopher to raze man's fantasy world of the gods and replace it by an encompassing whole in which man takes on his full significance. He, in principle, calls for a universal church embracing all men, who autonomously live under the guidance of reason. In such a 'church' the 'milk of divine worship' man imbibed during infancy is replaced by the solid food of the mature. Hence mankind will no longer use the word 'God' and will acknowledge the deep 'atheism' of Spinoza's thought.

In the years before World War II, the militant atheist Anton Constandse (1899–1985) is the third exception to be mentioned. In his pamphlet 'Spinoza and Atheism' (1932), he argues that it is beyond doubt that Spinoza was an atheist and not religious at all. He denied his 'pantheism' as well, because according to Spinoza nature is not at all mysterious or divine, and his God does not imply religion. His God is a mere concept. Spinoza refrained from calling himself an 'atheist' because in the seventeenth century it meant 'debauchee'. However, nowadays we find his atheist worldview in Marxism, and we are fully entitled to call him an atheist. His 'naturalism' led Marx and Engels to their materialism.

After World War II, the Marxist man of letters Theun de Vries (1907–2005) underlined Spinoza's atheism as well. He discovered Spinoza by reading Van Vloten's biography. In the mid-1950s, De Vries wrote a film script called 'The Blessed', which outlined Spinoza's uncompromising fight against oppression and intolerance. Due to his undaunted confidence in the development of reason, Spinoza maintained faith in humanism and in the future significance of his work, even though his protector, Johan de Witt, was killed and his brother-in-arms, Koerbagh, had died in prison. De Vries further developed the basic ideas of this film script in his writings for a communist periodical. He sees Spinoza's materialism as an outgrowth of the vigour of Dutch science and economy that overcame medieval dualism. The unleashed power of commercialism annihilated the otherworldliness of Christian morality, and the absolute concreteness of modern science drove out illusionary metaphysics and theology. Although De Vries did not adopt Van Vloten's call to drop the word God from the *Ethics*, all attempts to transform his materialism into bloodless pantheism or empty mysticism must be resisted. To all ends, Spinoza's 'intellectual love of God' means the love of 'beings' capable of love – that is, man. This love, De Vries argues, is the awareness of unity among people forming one single mind and body. The readers of the *Ethics* should be aware of the demythologizing force of Spinoza's thought.

Because of the rapid secularization of Dutch society in the 1960s, the social significance of the question of atheism diminished. Leading Spinozists of the previous generations, such as Hubbeling, De Deugd, and Klever, had no clear stance. H. G. Hubbeling's (1925–86) interest in Spinoza developed thanks to his studies with Paul Tillich in the early 1960s. In 1964 he took his degree on *Spinoza's methodology*. In line with Wittgenstein II, Hubbeling adopted the notion of philosophy as consisting of a whole range of diverse 'axiomatic systems', which allow uncongenial kinds of experience of a religious, moral, aesthetic, or scientific nature. Spinoza's system, Hubbeling observes, is 'pantheistic' by excluding a personal I–You relationship between God and man. However, in the Christian tradition both mystics and Tillich opted for such an impersonal concept of God. Moreover, there are even 'theistic' elements in Spinoza's concept of God, such as knowledge by forming ideas and self-love.

Wim Klever (b.1930) did not argue for Spinoza's atheism and observed that Spinoza intentionally upheld the word 'god', which he writes in lower case in order to underline the difference with the traditional concept of God as a person or as a ruler. Although Klever sees god and nature as equivalent, nature is provided with traditional divine attributes such as omnipresence,

omnipotence, and immutability. At the end of his version of the *Ethics*, Klever denounces Bennett, who called *Ethics* 5 'rubbish', and outlines the moral implications of a 'true and real knowledge of god'. Spinoza, according to Klever, retains a concept of God purified of all popular imagination and should therefore not be called an atheist.

The first part of the *Ethics*, covering a period of some 300 years, traces just a small number of Spinoza students who argued that Spinoza was an atheist according to the actual meaning of the word. The majority acknowledged that his philosophy focuses on God and that the philosopher was fully entitled to react indignantly to the accusation of atheism. The small group, in contrast, tended to ignore the frequent use of 'God' in Spinoza's works. However, they argued for the urgency to understand Spinoza 'better than the author himself' and to read the *Ethics*, like Van Vloten, without 'God'. Is this a plausible reading? Informed by history the answer is not black and white.

In 1993 the Dutch Spinoza scholar Wiep van Bunge wrote an essay on Spinoza's atheism. He stated that the concept of 'atheism' as outlined here stems from theological debate, recalling Pascal's distinction between the God of the philosophers and the biblical God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Spinoza did adopt this distinction, and dissolves the scholastic symbiosis of Christian and ancient theology, reason and faith, and Jerusalem and Athens.

The separation-thesis of TTP chapter 15 implies that Spinoza regarded his philosophy as completely distinct from any monotheistic theology. As a philosopher he opposes the gods of religions, produced by human imagination. Although the incidence of gods are a universal phenomenon and the belief in their existence plays a necessary part in the human condition, Spinoza himself had no religion based upon a faith in any of these gods. He was clearly an atheist in this respect. His personal life, one contemporary observed, was without any conventional religious practice such as prayer. As an anecdote goes, during grace before a meal he expressed his irreligious mind and by means of gestures he wanted to make clear the stupidity of such a ceremony (Meinsma, 1896, bijlage 14). Van Velthuysen's observation that Spinoza's concept of god makes all religious practice pointless may be correct after all. Spinoza adopted atheism, which rejects the god of religion, based on prophecy, but such an atheism is the privilege of philosophers alone.

Did Spinoza reject the 'God' of the philosophers as well? Here the answer will be less obvious. In the *Ethics*, 'God' is defined as the whole of infinite reality, being the cause of itself, the first cause of all. Spinoza here returns to the Aristotelian notion of an impersonal principle of nature, without adopting any notion of creation. However, unlike Aristotle's view, the divine

causality in all nature implies, according to Spinoza, that God is an absolute power and a comprehensive force, which is not limited to the thinking of itself (E1p11). Hence, Spinoza's God is provided with the traditional attribute of omnipotence as the appendix of *Ethics* 1 lists.

This absolute power implies that He acts by unchanging natural laws (E1p17) and produces all things in accordance with the universal laws of nature (E1p15s). This 'deist' concept of God implies an a-priori critique of miracles, which most clandestine atheist writings of the early Enlightenment period did not share. It is observed that 'theism rather than its opponents' applied the discoveries of early modern physics and endorsed the law-like structure of nature (Schröder 1998, 266). Apparently, in Spinoza's thought, 'God' is the philosophical guarantor of the order of nature. The concept of 'divine laws' also plays a basic part in Spinoza's physics. They produce the coherence in nature and enforce the coherence of its parts (Letter 32). Order in nature is not produced by the will of a Creator, but by its laws. In corporeal nature we cannot conceive parts without the rest of the substance. The same applies to thought as well.

The idea that God is the generative principle of reality is traditionally expressed by the word *nature*, which derives from the Latin verb *nasci* (to generate). Due to the generating power of nature, Cicero identified nature with God. Spinoza adopted the scholastic term *natura naturans*. This implies a certain transcendence of the Divine cause and all its effects – that is, the *natura naturata*, which is dependent on God. Hence, it is a 'complete mistake', as Nadler (2007) states, to call Spinoza's philosophy pantheism. However, it is equally improper to use the word 'atheism', since Spinozism requires a constitutive principle of reality, which we may call, following Spinoza's example, by its usual name God, or adopting Van Vloten's name, 'the coherence of all things'. Both terms we use to denote a more basic dimension of reality, which transcends the apparent chaos of modes we at first perceive, or phenomenal reality.

'God' also guarantees the intelligibility of the universe. Accordingly, the clandestine atheist manuscripts reveal the underlining of 'a renunciation of knowledge' and an acceptance of 'our intellect's limits' in order to argue for atheism (Schröder 1998, 190–1). Spinoza often uses 'idea' in a Neoplatonic sense of a true concept in God's intellect. Such ideas exist in the divine attribute of thought, which corresponds with His attribute extension, and the result is the identity of the order of ideas and the order of things. This implies that, as in the causal order of nature all effects follow from the first cause, the same applies to true ideas. In God there is an idea of His essence and of all things following from it (E2p3). Human ideas are true if they are

'real' ideas that are produced by 'thinking' and related to God. Given this conception of 'true ideas', which Spinoza develops in propositions 32–35 of part 2, he defines the third and highest form of knowledge that man can acquire. This 'intuitive' knowledge will originate in the adequate idea of an essence of a divine attribute. Our knowledge of all things in nature 'necessarily involves' the knowledge of the divine essence. If we omit the word 'God', we will need another, such as 'whole' or 'absolute' to express Spinoza's conviction that an adequate and perfect knowledge of concrete things presupposed an all-encompassing knowledge of reality as a whole. It is therefore no coincidence that Cuffeler, the 'best friend' of Spinoza, reformulated Spinoza's philosophy in the form of a *pantosophia* (all-wisdom). Spinoza remained in the classic tradition as well and regarded all science as proceeding first from philosophy, which studies the unifying cause of reality and is therefore called 'divine'.

Spinoza's philosophy, therefore, requires a concept to refer to the basic unifying principle in nature. The word we use is arbitrary, but by using 'God' Spinoza followed a tradition of speculation, which originated in antiquity and continues to this day. He certainly would have appreciated Einstein's famous remark that he believed in Spinoza's God.

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13

Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France

ALAN CHARLES KORS

The late eighteenth century in France saw the publication of an unambiguously explicit, self-assured, and systematic atheism in the works of Paul Henry Thiry (baron) d'Holbach, Jacques-André Naigeon, and, posthumously, Denis Diderot. In the early eighteenth century, several clandestine manuscripts circulated (in France and elsewhere) about whose atheistic status scholars argue, but all students agree that one of these manuscripts, the posthumously discovered *Testament* of Jean Meslier, a country Catholic priest, was an expression of intensely and fully atheistic views (Benítez 1996; 2012). How did such atheism become part of the debates and inner dialogues of early modern French minds, and, in particular, how did such atheism overcome the tidal wave of an increasingly confident "physical theology," in which the seeming adaptedness of all things in nature could be explained only by intelligent and providential design, in short, only by the existence of God?

The "atheist" was a necessary interlocutor of the Christian theologian who must state and overcome the atheist's arguments against the existence of God, in a seventeenth and eighteenth century which, especially in France, gave high priority to a confident philosophical theology. When disciples of Aristotle, René Descartes, and Nicolas Malebranche – scholastics, Cartesians, and Malebranchists in fierce and unruly competition to be the recognized philosophical voice of French Catholicism – sought to demonstrate definitively the errors (and dangers) of their opponents and critics, they would seek to demonstrate that each other's proofs of God failed and would be wholly unconvincing to the theoretical atheist (Kors 1990; 2016a; 2016b).

Almost none of these protagonists actually thought that their opponents were disbelievers, but they argued that if one began from the premises of their antagonists, one logically should conclude that God was unproven and that nature could be explained without recourse to the divine. For Cartesians,

no assurance could be derived from St. Thomas Aquinas' and the Aristotelians' a-posteriori proofs, because induction allowed no certainty; nothing infinite could be derived from the finite; and nothing perfect could be inferred from the imperfect. For Aristotelians, the Cartesian demonstrations of God from the idea of God were a verbal game disconnected from the phenomena of the world. The Cartesians, in their view, defined a perfect being as having necessary existence, and, lo and behold, by definition, such a being existed. The Aristotelians claimed that no finite and imperfect human mind could contain the idea of the infinite and perfect, a being we inferred, to the contrary, from the behavior of the world. The Cartesians replied that if there could be no human idea of the actually infinite and perfect being, then the Aristotelians could not know that any cause which they inferred from the world was infinite and perfect, because they could have no such idea.

For the Malebranchists, the Cartesians were correct about the impossibility of all Thomistic and Aristotelian proofs, and the Aristotelians were correct that no finite human idea actually could be an idea of a perfect God. Against Malebranche, both Cartesians and Aristotelians argued that he had annihilated the very idea of God.

The combatants could engage in this philosophical sparring because of their supreme confidence in the absurdity of any disbelief in God or any categorical naturalism. If you reduced your opponents to such naturalism, it merely was a demonstration of the failings of their philosophical systems. It was inconceivable to virtually all thinkers that matter could exist or act of its own essence. God was the only possible source of the original motion and the conservation of all being. Further, the new science seemed to almost all its devotees to have provided us with boundless evidence of the intelligent design of nature. How could the atheist think otherwise?

It was not the Aristotelians who insisted upon naturalist conclusions from Aristotelian thought. Quite to the contrary, they insisted on the virtual indispensability of Aristotelian philosophy to Christian theism. It certainly was not the Cartesians who drew naturalist conclusions from Descartes, nor the Malebranchists who drew naturalist conclusions from Malebranche. Again, each camp saw itself as a pillar of theistic orthodoxy. Rather, the proponents of each system, proclaiming their school alone to be the appropriate voice for Christian culture and education, also claimed to see a logical naturalist conclusion to the thinking of each rival philosophy. It was in the actual, historical context of early modern debates, passions, and polemic – played out before a fascinated reading public in book after book, refutation after refutation, and reply after reply, and spilling out into the popular learned journals – that the

culture generated the model of an atheism that triumphed over (the other's) Aristotelianism, (the other's) Cartesianism, (the other's) Malebranchism. With relentlessness and skill, the dialecticians of early modern learned France taught readers to find the atheistic naturalism of all systems. The issue for them was where ways of thinking not their own should be judged to lead. The historical issue, however, was what such debates and characterizations placed before the reading public as lessons in atheism and naturalism.

For Aristotelians, there was a common theme of attack: by eliminating final causality in physics, Cartesian philosophy purged recognition of providence from natural philosophy; by seeking to explain the development over time of the cosmos by the laws of mechanics, it denied creation and design; by attacking Aristotelian substantial forms, it made matter-in-motion a productive agent of order. In short, the opponents of Descartes would insist that if one were a Cartesian, one had no need of God to understand the natural world.

Relentlessly, Aristotelians argued that without final causes – the purpose or *telos* of things that Cartesians ruled to be unknowable in physics – natural changes would be conceived of as explicable by the movements of matter alone. Further, for these late scholastics, who dominated the universities, the Cartesian equation of matter and extension also denied the qualitative degrees of perfection that led the mind to God, leaving nature a uniform matter combining and separating. Fatally, for the Aristotelians, the Cartesian denial of substantial forms – immaterial entities that governed the behavior of material things – gave to matter itself a creative power, whose own purely material motions accounted for all phenomena. As the widely read Jesuit *Journal de Trévoux* put the issue in March 1708 with a bluntness typical of two generations of debate:

> There is no longer any question of God in the Cartesian system. Everything occurs by purely mechanical general laws, and, yet worse, by laws founded not upon the choice and free will of God, but upon the very inherent and inalienable nature of things . . . such that a good Cartesian can say: Give me matter and motion, and I will make a world, that is to say, with that alone, I will explain how the world was made.

It went on:

> A strict Cartesian . . . without departing from his principles . . . can suppose matter given of itself and without God's involvement . . . [and] it is quibbling on the subordinate issue after having decided the principal issue to have recourse to God for the production of motion when one has learned to dispense with him for the existence of matter.
>
> (*Journal de Trévoux 1708*, 387–9)

Though more circumspect, there was a similar assault by the Cartesians and Malebranchists upon Aristotelians, demonstrating that they must conclude from Aristotelian premises in favor of categorical naturalism. The Benedictine Malebranchist philosopher Dom François Lamy, in his *L'incrédule amené à la religion*, writing for a particularly broad audience in 1710, was typical of a vast assault upon Aristotelian belief. In his critique, the Aristotelians had invested material substances with "forms" and "virtues" that "explained" the natural behavior of corporeal things. If they were correct, then there would be no grounds for denying that purposeful, regular activity could result from the essential nature of matter. In the Cartesian and Malebranchist systems, he argued, all depended upon the causal role of God, as the original or ongoing source of activity. In the Aristotelian system,

> if God could give matter these forms and these faculties, capable of acting with such regularity, it is a sign that they are not contrary to the nature of things, and that they have no incompatibility whatsoever with matter. Thus, they could be eternal and serve for the arrangements of matter's parts.

The Aristotelians could not fall back on the necessity of a divine cause of motion, for "if matter could receive the motive *power* from God [rather than motion itself], there is a natural compatibility between this power and matter." If one allowed Aristotelian powers and forms, then *the* bulwark against atheism, an assurance of matter's impotence to effect motion and order of its own nature, would be fatally breached, and "one can parry this blow only by maintaining, with the Cartesians, that matter is in no way susceptible of force of movement" (1710, 95–116). The Aristotelians had no need of God.

For anti-Aristotelians, then, Aristotle's system had made the natural order creative and tending to order *of its own natural powers*. How dare the Aristotelians accuse Cartesians of implicit naturalism? As the widely read Jean-Pierre Nicéron angrily observed, the Aristotelians had substituted an inherent "nature," or substantial form, for the power of God, "to act in His place, and they speak of it in the same way as if it were in fact an intelligent Being that provides for everything with much wisdom." Such a philosophy, in his view, and that of the many prior authors whom he cited, was nothing less than a pagan divinizing of nature itself (1727–45, XXXIII, 131–3).

For Cartesians, it was the supposition of these "real and distinct" *natural* qualities which, in the Aristotelian system, eliminated the dependence of activity upon motion derived from God. As the monk and philosopher Antoine Legrand put it, all natural things were either substance or a mode

of substance. If the Aristotelians meant what they said about natural substantial forms independent of material substance, they believed in a self-subsisting natural being determining natural phenomena, a manifest self-contradiction for a Cartesian, he believed, but obviously not for an Aristotelian (1679, 18–19). It was these sorts of analyses that permitted anti-Aristotelians such as La Mothe Le Vayer to describe an Aristotle so naturalistic "that the majority [of thinkers] have estimated that he recognized no other God but nature itself" (1671, 292–4). As the pious Jansenist theologian and priest Adrien Baillet, in his frequently reprinted *Vie de Descartes* (1691), put it, Aristotelian substantial forms allowed a creative matter, and the dominant philosophy could not "strongly combat the Atheists unto the deepest recesses of their fortifications" (1691, II, 362–3). A critical catalyst for the emergence of early modern French atheism, then, was that every particular proof of God had its philosophical critics, with rationalists rejecting every a-posteriori proof of God from the evidence of nature, and empiricists rejecting every a-priori proof of God as non-demonstrative.

The most influential assault on Christian belief, in early modern France, of course, was deism, a rejection of supernatural revelation joined to a belief in a providential God knowable from nature. Although most eighteenth-century Catholic theologians and polemicists decried deism as merely a stepping-stone to atheism, this was historically, with a few exceptions, not the case. It is difficult to overstate just how wildly speculative atheism seemed to most early modern minds. How could one explain adaptation before Darwin, and if one offered a purely theoretical explanation of it (as the atheists did), what possible evidence could one offer? Did desert animals have desert camouflage and forest animals have forest camouflage *by chance*? Was it *by chance* that every creature had the senses, organs, and instincts suited to its particular and distinct niche in nature? Was it *by chance* that an immeasurable number of variables fell into place exactly for all forms of life to eat, to survive, and to reproduce? Was it *by chance* that rains fell upon the earth, that the sun gave us precisely the warmth essential to life, or, indeed, as Newton stressed as an impossibility, was it *by chance* that the placement and velocity of the planets and moons prevented gravitational collapse in our solar system? The examples were endless, and for most early modern minds it was a simple choice between *design or chance* being the cause of the order that made all such phenomena possible. Darwin would offer both theory and data. The early modern world, in any significant sense, had only theory.

For most early modern minds, however one might demonstratively prove the existence of God to a learned philosopher, the world obviously bespoke

intelligent providential design, and foremost among the evidence for this was the adaptation of living beings, and, in particular, of humans, to their environments. This was an insuperable barrier, the culture believed, to atheistic naturalism.

Authors and readers, however, were heirs to a century of Cartesian and other forms of anti-finalism (all entailing the rejection of knowledge of the causal purposes of God from the particular structures of nature). Crucially, they were also heirs to over two centuries of an intense Epicurean presence in European thought. Perhaps what is most surprising is how circumscribed a current of thought atheism remained until the advent of Darwin.

The Epicurean tradition had reached the learned world of seventeenth-century France in a great diversity of forms and by a great diversity of means. It was known by classical, patristic, scholastic, and contemporaneous citations, paraphrases, commentaries, and explications; by commonplace caricature; by frequent pedagogical reference to its significance as one of the major "schools" of ancient thought, for purposes both of erudition and of refutation from Christian perspectives; and by its own preserved texts, above all, Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (Kors 2016b).

Those who viewed Epicureanism as irreligion and atheism often wrote of it as the *ne plus ultra* of pagan disbelief, but it was not the case that everyone saw it in such a light. Some early modern orthodox minds found Epicurean atomism quite benign, judging it to be above all a philosophy of physics or of ethics, or both, with an incidental and curious theology somehow appended to it.

On the whole, most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commentators claimed to see the Epicurean doctrine as a patently absurd system, with its atoms, its void, its plurality of worlds, its material soul, its indifferent gods, and either its denial of order or its belief that what we termed "order" could be, in some sense, the product of chance. For such commentators – and their numbers were legion – Epicureanism was far more an example of the fanciful and benighted thought of the pre-Christian past than a substantial menace to any orthodox certainties. For every author who stood in horror or fascination before Epicurean thought, there were many theologians and philosophers who treated it simply as a convenient *locus classicus* of objections that the human mind had framed against providence.

For some readers, however, in numbers impossible to discern, the frisson of Epicurean philosophy – its thrill and its horror – arose from its unabashed denial of providence. Scholars and dialecticians might well argue that objections to providence in general, entailing the attribution of causal agency to

chance, were logically absurd and dependent upon an incoherent hypothesis. Nonetheless, as noted, shepherds of human souls within Christendom always had recognized that, in practice, doubts about providence in the minds of a suffering humanity were the great occasions of at least ephemeral doubts about the existence of God. For any Christian mind that could imagine (or experience) the uniting of such a cry of despair to the weight of Epicurean objections to providence, however, the prospect was quite awesome.

The Epicureans of tradition and extant text had argued against providence on the grounds that the gods were too blessed to be concerned with the world. In one sense, that was a theological argument – about the nature of divine being – that Christian theologians did not find particularly difficult to resolve: Wasn't indifference rather than governance a contradiction of divine perfection? In another sense, it was a philosophical argument that touched the heart of categorical naturalism: Did the phenomena of the world truly testify to governance by a perfect being? Epicureanism, as a set of texts and commonplace positions, was an object of study and commentary in the early modern west, and, as such, it exposed all serious students to a perspective from which a human being might gaze upon the whole of the world and find no evidence of divine mind or wisdom in its being, arrangement, and operations.

The most influential late-seventeenth-century neo-Epicurean was Guillaume Lamy, doctor-regent of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Paris. His *De Principiis Rerum* (1669) was a critical comparison of the "three world systems," Aristotelian, Cartesian, and Epicurean, in which the author favored Epicureanism at every turn. Crossing the naturalist Rubicon, Lamy proclaimed motion to be not a mode of matter, but essential to body itself. He made plain the unprivileged natural position, in his system, of the particular world that man inhabited, arguing that there were "an infinity of worlds" within the universe, and that the extinction of any sun would cause the dissolution of the cosmos that surrounded it, providing matter for neighboring worlds, but felt no more by the universe "than the world would feel the death of a flea or the fall of a single tree within an infinite forest." He argued that if "chance" were understood to mean the cause of things without cognition by the disposition of things, it was exactly what we meant by natural explanation. Anything else was theology, not physics, he insisted, two categorically distinct realms. (He concluded piously that he was a Christian who saw God in nature by faith alone; as a philosopher, he saw only a consistent system of natural causes.)

In Lamy's *Discours Anatomiques* (1675; reprinted in Brussels in 1679), addressing the nature of anatomy, he argued that purposeful function did not create form, but, rather, form created function. The suitedness of living things, and, in particular, of man, was the outcome of chance. It was illogical, he wrote, to reason from function to purpose, accusing his critics of committing themselves to the proposition that God has created the clitoris so that women could masturbate. Eyes and ears were not made so that we could see and hear; rather, we saw and heard because physiologically we had ears and eyes. The goal of anatomy was to describe according to experience, not to fabricate occult causes beyond its ken.

The mind itself, Lamy observed, contemplating its own achievements, such as mathematics and logic, refused to think of itself as "soiled by matter" and wished to think of itself as "divine." Indeed, the mind achieved prodigious things, but let it not forget that one single gram of opium vitiates all its functions, that five glasses of wine renders a genius imbecilic, and that the mind is born, matures, finds it strength, and weakens with the body. Matter in motion randomly but necessarily, given its forms, made this or that part "by a blind necessity of the movements of matter," without purpose. Even the suitedness of species could be accounted for by this system. "At the birth of our world, which is but a small part of the universe," he explained, the diverse arrangements of matter had produced a large variety of animals of different species. Most were not suited for survival or procreation, and, unable to feed themselves, or multiply, they were not observable now by natural philosophers. The remainder, some small minority of the original animals, were well suited to preserve themselves, and they compose the species that we observe today. Only the suited survived and procreated, and the world was populated by animals whose arrangements appeared suited for their needs, which wrongly occasions our wonderment (1679).

It was one thing to articulate atheistic arguments hypothetically or speculatively, to recreate an ancient system, or even to push the boundaries of naturalism as far as one could, and it is surely plausible (perhaps evident) that some who engaged in this did so with intellectual conviction, even if that conviction were veiled in this or that way. It was quite another thing, however, to propound atheistic arguments from the innermost intensity of one's mind and heart, to make such arguments from a manifest belief not only that they were credible, or, indeed, definitely true, but that they were indispensable to the well-being of humankind and essential to the reduction of human pain and suffering.

The country curé Jean Meslier put forward his atheism in precisely this most forceful way. We know remarkably little about him. He performed his priestly duties during his lifetime, while composing and leaving for posterity not merely a bitterly harsh assessment of a Roman Catholic Church in which he did not believe (and for serving which he apologized to his parishioners), but three copies, in his own hand, of an explicitly atheistic manuscript. The manuscript circulated widely and in diverse forms – including in variants that presented only his critique of revealed religion – but we have the originals, and a large number of the manuscripts were faithful replications of his actual "Testament" (1973, I, i-clviii; Benítez 2012, 11–33).

Meslier was familiar with and profoundly influenced by prior debates about proving God – as seen both in his conclusions and in his terms – but the stakes of such contestations were far from merely philosophical for him. Indeed, as Miguel Benítez showed repeatedly in his empathetic and rigorously analytic history of Meslier's formal philosophy, the latter could be inconsistent and, at critical junctures, theoretically incomplete (2012). For Meslier, as for most theologians with views antithetical to his own, the largest and most momentous issues had to do not with forms of demonstration, but with the human orientation toward reality and life. His atheism, for all of its complex argumentation, was above all ethical in its foundation. It had to be true, in his eyes, for it to be ethical, but it was the moral consequence of atheism that drew him to it with such energy. For Meslier, it was precisely belief in God that underlay the ideas and practices of all the religions of the world, convictions and practices that, in his view, promoted and countenanced the despotism, injustice, and suffering that had befallen mankind.

Such consequentialist disbelief might be atypical, but it was neither new nor foreign to the learned world. Indeed, both the appeal of Epicurean naturalism to Lucretius and those who held to his vision and the appeal of immanent monism to Spinoza and those who followed him consistently lay precisely in what followed from such philosophy for the living of human lives. The title of Spinoza's work, after all, was the *Ethica*. Further, for the educated world, it was a commonplace to say that superstitious belief in *false* gods had led to human misery. Meslier did not spontaneously produce new ideas. He was unsurprisingly a product of the world in which he was immersed. Nonetheless, there was something singular in his explicit, vigorous, single-minded, and truly passionate advocacy of the view that belief in any divinity was the primary source of human suffering. Arguments denying God or divine activity were always remarkable. Assertions of the humaneness and moral necessity of atheism, however, though made possible by

those arguments, were in many ways a new chapter in the history of French thought. Pierre Bayle might have argued shockingly that the atheist *could be* virtuous (1695). Meslier argued that atheism was the only rightful moral view in the world.

For Meslier, the remediable causes of human suffering arose from two sources: superstition and political injustice. These twin evils, which required human beings to forego natural wisdom and a natural concern for their own well-being, both depended and were based upon the deceits and impostures of "what you are led piously to call religion." Political power established itself upon the "errors and abuses of religions." To begin to undo this nightmarish condition, Meslier explained, he would prove that all religions were false and were only "human inventions."

A deist, reaching this same conclusion, would have argued that such superstitions arose from a false idea of God. Meslier, instead, asserted that the source of such suffering was the very belief in God itself. All religious errors and abuses, he affirmed, "are based only on the belief and the persuasion that there is a God . . . that there is a supreme, omnipotent, infinitely good, infinitely wise, and infinitely perfect Sovereign Being, who wishes to be adored and served by men in this or that manner." It was on that belief that princes and kings had founded their alleged authority. However, Meslier proclaimed, "there is no God," and he promised to prove this decisively "by demonstrative arguments drawn from metaphysics, from the principles of physics, and from the principles of morality." The non-existence of God was the ultimate proof of the vanity and falseness of "all the religions that we see in the world" (1973, I). Persuasion of the non-existence of God was the *sine qua non* of freeing humankind from its torments.

Meslier was a serious reader. His work and his readers' notes reflected a deep familiarity with the mutual refutations of scholastics, Cartesians, and Malebranchists. Addressing proofs of God from the beauty, order, and perfections of the world, and from the necessity of creation, Meslier made positive use of arguments long in speculative circulation. There was no reason, he asserted, that nature itself could not be the cause of its own perfections. Any argument that one made for the necessary existence of a first and creative cause begged the question, because it would apply equally to nature itself. Further, if an uncreated being could not exist, then, sequitur, God also could not exist. Assume the eternity of the matter that we observe all around us – matter that we could see, touch, and find everywhere – and we could abandon the incomprehensibility of "creation from nothing" by a God that was unseen, intangible, and occupied no place. In short, we could adopt "the system of the natural formation of the World, made by the matter itself of which it is composed."

For Meslier, the incoherence of theism was further manifest when the theists applied qualities and behaviors to their God that we only had experienced in material creatures: will, thought, action, love, knowledge, anger, and life itself. They substituted invisible and external causes beyond the world for visible and inherent ones. Additionally, the theists posited an omnipotent and infinitely perfect being that had no "visible and sensible perfection." Why wasn't He manifest to us, which would have provided grounds not to doubt His existence? Instead, their God "does not make Himself seen, nor felt, nor known anyway in any manner whatsoever." One might as well say that there was an infinitely bright and clear sun that one could neither see nor feel.

For Meslier, the Cartesian and Malebranchist efforts to prove the existence of God from the idea of God, avoiding the problem of the evidence of good and evil, failed at the outset, because everything that we knew was material. Our only "clear and distinct idea" was that of matter. If one annihilated the idea of God, the sky and earth remained. If one annihilated the idea of the material, everything known vanished (1973, I).

Rejecting governance and intelligent order, Meslier sought to account for the diversity of things in the world by means of laws of motion, inertia (in which he included circular motion), and the "concurrence of the diverse parts of matter, which come together and modify themselves diversely in all the bodies that they compose." The forms of matter arose from its following the fixed laws of motion and the inertial perpetuation of movement. Holding to a largely Cartesian system of physics, Meslier argued that the "ordinary course of nature," not intelligence, caused physical behaviors, including such events as evaporation and meteorological phenomena. We could explain these things without recourse to an intelligent being. Like produced like, but novelty and change occurred because of physical circumstance in which matter modified matter. Forms changed, as when grass became a part of a horse's flesh through digestion, or when wheat made into bread became the flesh of man or other beast, modified by particularities and interactions along that particular physical itinerary. Just as human grafts changed plants, changing "the first determination of matter" by new modifications so effectively that new fruits resulted, just so could modifications of matter by purely physical events produce changes and diversity in all living things. None of this required God (1973, II).

The most dramatic barrier to proof of God for Meslier, however, was the problem of evil, which had become so prominent and urgent an issue in the wake of the debates surrounding Bayle, Leibniz, and their critics or defenders (Kors 2016). Meslier urged that "the evils, miseries, vices, and wickedness" in the world disproved that there could also be "an infinitely good and infinitely

wise sovereign being who was capable of preventing them." Just as an "infinite light" would shine everywhere, so an "infinite goodness," if it existed, would extend everywhere, which was so manifestly not the case in this world. The arguments were well rehearsed and familiar to every philosopher and theologian, but for Meslier they were the strongest weapons against belief in God. The earth was the scene not only of evils, but a place where the good suffered injustice and misery while the deceitful and wicked flourished. What good human father would allow "the law of the strongest" to flourish in his own family? What good shepherd would let his flock be devoured? What good judge, sovereign, or governor would be praised for allowing injustice to prevail? The God of the theists, however, was worse than the most malicious father, shepherd, judge, sovereign, or governor, because He supposedly had infinite power, and because such permission to evil was even deemed part of His perfection. Their God allowed His children to be born "maimed and malformed in body or mind." Would an "infinitely good and infinitely wise" perfect being "take pleasure" in seeing His children "languish and die of hunger? In misery? . . . hate each other? Tear each other apart? Destroy each other? And devour each other cruelly, as they do the ones to the others?" For Meslier, "That is certainly not believable." The theists proclaimed their God to be the protector of the just and the innocent, but the whole world testified otherwise. This was why believers had to invent their imaginary compensatory heaven, the very need for which argued against their own portrait of their God (1973, II).

The influence of Epicurean thought appears great, indeed, on Holbach's thought. When Holbach's library was catalogued shortly after his death, it contained *twelve* Latin, English, Italian, and French editions of Lucretius *De Rerum Natura*, including that produced by his children's tutor, Lagrange, which he subsidized (*Catalogue des livres du feu M. le Baron d'Holbach*, 1789). In the "Profession de Foi" in his *Emile*, the passionate deist Jean-Jacques Rousseau recounted his debates with "the atheists" at Holbach's salon. They argued that "organized bodies were combined fortuitously in countless ways before taking on constant forms." When told that one might just as well believe that "print thrown around at random had produced the *Aeneid* all in order," they answered, "You forget . . . the number of throws." In short, they believed that "combination and chance" had formed the world we observe. The debate between deist and atheist, Rousseau noted, was precisely over whether order could be the product of chance. Indeed, Rousseau put many of Lucretius' (and Lamy's) more explicit arguments in the mouths of his atheistic interlocutors at Holbach's homes, in particular, the argument that nature

had produced many monstrous forms incapable of survival and reproduction, such that we only were seeing the survivors (1979).

In Holbach's *Système de la nature*, all that we meant by "order" was a moment of natural configuration conducive to our human survival and happiness. All that we meant by "disorder" was a natural configuration conducive to our destruction or suffering. We were but a moment in the eternal flux, but the narrowness of our time frame and our illusory self-flattery about our place in the cosmos led us to believe that eternal change and natural structure existed in order to make us possible. In fact, every living entity known to us existed for a while, and then, as conditions changed, decomposed, providing materials for new entities. That was an appropriate model of nature writ large. We knew nothing about our origins or the causes of our seeming adaptability, but our planet surely was simply one among many detached celestial bodies, and life surely was the particular production of matter on this particular globe in its particular circumstances. If essential physical relationships changed, which they must, then forms of life unable "to coordinate" with their surroundings would die out, and only varieties capable of that coordination would survive. We believed ourselves to be the king of nature, but (almost borrowing Lamy's own phrase), let one atom displace itself in the universe, and it could begin a sequence that would lead to our destruction and to the reign of new forms of life on earth (1998).

For Naigeon, writing in the *Philosophie ancienne et moderne* against Bacon's argument from design, experience disclosed that there was nothing inherently "beautiful" or "horrible" in nature. For human beings who "coexist" successfully with nature, the universe appears a lovely example of art and design; for those who "coexist" painfully with the universe, the very same sequence of eternal causes and effects will appear dark and imperfect. The spectacle of nature revealed not a permanent coexistence of the forms of life with nature, but merely the permanence of matter *per se* and the impermanence of any of its particular forms, of which man as a species was one. The beings who coexist today will pass away as conditions change, Naigeon concluded, and no one could predict what new forms of material being would emerge (1791).

Denis Diderot was, like his close friends Holbach and Naigeon, an atheist, but he took no pains to publish such works during his lifetime (in fact, chiding his two comrades for their imprudence). He bequeathed his atheistic manuscripts to Naigeon for posthumous publication, most of which occurred in the nineteenth century. In those manuscripts, however, and especially in the *Rêve de d'Alembert*, Diderot emphasized the proto-evolutionary sides of French Enlightenment atheism. The hypothesis of a God explained nothing

about nature, Diderot urged, led to countless logical problems, and arrogantly assumed that the ephemeral world that we observed was the permanent form of nature. Give natural processes time, and nature would generate an extraordinary diversity of forms, some of which would be fitted for survival. If natural circumstances changed, existing forms would disappear and new ones emerge. The transition from living to dead forms of material being was purely physical, the difference between a statue and a living man being not the material elements of each, but merely the form of organization. The foundation of morality was the human desire for survival, pleasure, and social existence, a foundation that could not be understood and acted upon so long as people believed that there was a God (1964).

In his *Additions aux pensées philosophiques* (1770 [1964]), Diderot, revising his own earlier deistic work, wrote of a misanthropic hermit who brooded for many years in search of the one act he could perform from which the maximum of human suffering would follow. The hermit emerged, at last, announcing the existence of God. In the *Rêve de d'Alembert*, he suggested that the implications of atheism and naturalistic determinism for human beings were self-acceptance within the limits of possible change and self-improvement within the limits offered by knowledge of causes. He implied strongly that successful adaptation to a changing natural environment was the only and ultimate natural source of normative values. Enlightenment atheism was unable to offer the explanations of spontaneous, that is, undesigned order that Charles Darwin could offer to unbelief. It turned its attention rather, above all else, to what it saw as the moral arguments and imperatives of denial of the existence of God and explanation of nature without recourse to a Supreme Being (1964).

In *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* [*D'Alembert's Dream*] – written in 1769, discussed among his friends, but unpublished until 1830 – Diderot engaged in proto-evolutionary speculation, arguing that all species had emerged from prior forms in the course of periods of time almost immeasurably greater than that granted by Scripture, and, indeed, that all species would be ephemeral. The survival of a species, he and his friend Naigeon would write, depended upon its ability to "coexist" with an ever-changing nature. Thus, our survival, for the atheistic materialists, depended upon successful adaptation to a changing natural environment, and that was the only and ultimate natural source of normative values. There was an ethic, then, to scientific truth itself: If we deluded ourselves, we betrayed not only our happiness, but our lives. In his *Additions aux pensées philosophiques* [*Additions to the Philosophical Thoughts*] (1770 [1964]), Diderot wrote of us as trying to find our way in a dark forest,

with only the small lantern of reason to guide us. Along comes a stranger, he wrote, who tells us that it is so dark that we should blow out the lantern. That man, Diderot concluded, is a theologian (1964).

For Holbach, human life was a production of nature and wholly subject to its laws. Ignorant of those laws and desperate to preserve himself from pain and fear, man had invented illusory realities apart from nature, illusions on which he convinced himself that his well-being or suffering depended. This strategy, so to speak, had been profoundly dysfunctional for humankind. First, it had led us away from efforts to understand nature on her own real terms, which alone could put experience and knowledge in the service of the heart's desire for ease from pain. We were forfeiting the very possibility of that happiness or diminution of suffering that we were seeking through religion and supernaturalism. Second, the turn away from nature, in addition to leaving us ignorant of real causes, had led us to create gods, superstitions, and myths as would-be routes to well-being, which, history taught us, had only increased our misery. Fearful and helpless, we turned to authorities that we believed could control the forces above nature, when it was our mastery of nature itself upon which our well-being depended. The only means of redressing the human condition was to see and study nature as the sole cause and site of all that concerned or affected us (1998). Above all else, eighteenth-century French atheism was, in its formulations, a categorical naturalism and humanism, advanced without metaphysical certainty, offering, it urged, a means of knowledge and understanding that might right the sorry scheme of things a bit closer to the heart's desire for well-being.

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The Scientific Revolution

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> At all times there used to be a strong tendency among physicists, particularly in England, to form as concrete a picture as possible of the physical reality behind the phenomena, the not directly perceptible cause of that which can be perceived by the senses; they were always looking for hidden mechanisms, and in so doing supposed, without being concerned about this assumption, that these would be essentially the same kind as the simple instruments which men had used from time immemorial to relieve their work, so that a skillful mechanical engineer would be able to imitate the real course of the events taking place in the microcosm in a mechanical model on a larger scale.
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> *(Dijksterhuis 1961, 497)*

The Scientific Revolution is conveniently dated from 1543, when the Polish astronomer Nicolas Copernicus published his *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*), in which he argued that the Earth goes around the Sun rather than the Sun around the Earth – the "heliocentric" picture of the universe from the "geocentric" picture of the universe (Kuhn 1957). It is as conveniently dated to 1687, when the English mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton published *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (*Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*) which, thanks to his three laws of motion and his law of gravitational attraction, gave the all-important causal explanation to what the Revolution had wrought (Westfall 1971, 1980).

Popular opinion has it that the Scientific Revolution was the key event changing western culture essentially from one that was God-dominated to one where God was absent – non-belief if not outright denial, atheism (Ruse 2015). This is not exactly false – we do go from St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas to David Hume and Bertrand Russell. We do go from Copernicus, who was a minor cleric (he was not ordained) who died in the bosom of the Church, to Newton who, although he was an Anglican, clearly

had doubts about the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and edged toward Unitarianism. But the story is a lot more complex and interesting than that – as we shall now see.

The World as Organism

Begin at the beginning – Plato. It was he who first fully formulated the world picture – the root metaphor – that dominated thinking up to the time of the Revolution (Ruse 2013, 2017). It was he who argued that the world should be interpreted in terms of an *organism*, indeed arguing that the world itself is an organism. Because God – who Plato identified with the Form of the Good – wanted everything to be as good as possible, he modeled the universe on the best of all things, namely Himself! And this brings in intelligence. God realized that the intelligent is better than the unintelligent and that the physical on its own cannot supply this. And so straight off we get a world soul.

> Guided by this reasoning, he put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, and so he constructed the universe. He wanted to produce a piece of work that would be as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow. This, then, in keeping with our likely account, is how we must say divine providence brought our world into being as a truly living thing, endowed with soul and intelligence. (Timaeus, in Cooper 1997, 30b-c)

World as an organism! When you think about things – humans, horses, hedgerows, rivers, ravines, rocks – think of them in terms of organisms. Use this as your means of understanding. Think about a mouse. Why is it darting forth across the room? Think about the Moon. Why is it going round and round the Earth? Aristotle consolidated this kind of thinking. As it happens, for metaphysical reasons, he was not too sure that the Earth as a whole is an organism – Gaia – but he insisted on using the organic model or metaphor as a principle of understanding. He distinguished "efficient causes" – the blade that chopped off the murderer's head – from "final causes" – the head was chopped off in order to punish the miscreant and as an example to others. Organisms obviously show final causes – what is the point or purpose of the nose? – but so do other things – what is the purpose of the Moon? Is it just to light the way home for drunken philosophers?

Plato and Aristotle were, technically, pagans, although I don't think either was into dancing naked around the sacred oak in the moonlight – although Socrates might have been, especially if his fellow dancers were rather good-looking young men. Pagans or not, their thinking meshed readily with that

late-comer, the Christian religion. Both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas made good use of the Greek insistence on final-cause thinking (what today is often known as "teleological" thinking). Most famous, perhaps, is St. Thomas' fifth proof for the existence of God:

> We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God. (Aquinas 1981)

Challenging Aristotle

And so to Copernicus. Now, in some ways, he was clearly pushing against the accepted world picture. Not just that he was putting the Sun at the center, but that in some fashion he was downgrading the status of the Earth. Although there had been heliocentrists in antiquity – most notably Aristarchus of Samos – the Earth really doesn't seem to be whizzing around the Sun, like us all standing on a roundabout or on a horse galloping fast around a circular track. Geocentrism seemed to be common sense and, as significantly, was backed by the authority of Aristotle. He proposed what is known as the "Two Sphere Universe." The Earth is at the center, and it is spherical, and the stars are on an outer sphere. The Earth is stationary, so to account for the movements of the stars through the heavens, the outer sphere is in constant motion – constant circular motion, for the circle was considered the perfect figure. The planets and the Sun are on invisible crystal spheres within this outer sphere. In Aristotle's physics they had to be held in place because he believed that there are four substances – earth, water, air, and fire – and they have their proper places with a constant tendency to move toward them – earth, then water, air, and finally fire, the smoke of which can be seen always rising up from the ground. Without the spheres, the planets and Sun would fall into the Earth. Because the planets, from our perspective, so obviously do not go through the heavens in circles, later astronomers added more crystal spheres and varied the speeds – still all circular. This way it was possible to show how the illusion of non-circular motion could be achieved.

All of this was meat and drink to the Christians, especially the privileging of the Earth – the jewel of God's creation and the home of his favorite organisms, humans – "made in his image." Now Copernicus was proposing to eject us from our favored place in the universe, and coincidentally driving a horse and four through the whole system of physics Aristotle had promoted. Objects can hardly drop downwards because they are striving to find their natural place, the center of the universe. The center of Earth is no longer the center of the universe.

Worse was to come. German astronomer Johannes Kepler, drawing on incredibly accurate measurements of the heavens by the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, realized that the planets do not go in circles – no matter how perfect such a figure might be – but go rather in ellipses, with the Sun at one focus. They don't even go around the center! And so onto the seventeenth century, with the Italian Galileo finding the laws of motion down here on Earth – cannon balls, for instance, do not loop the loop but go in parabolas – and contemporaries looking at other aspects of nature, such as English physician William Gilbert working on magnetism and Irish aristocrat Robert Boyle famously on gases. Then, with his physics, Newton put it all together, showing that the same laws could explain the heavens – Kepler's laws of planetary motion – and the Earth – Galileo's laws of terrestrial motion. The Aristotelian distinction between the perfect unchanging heavens and the imperfect forever-changing Earth was gone.

The World as Machine

As was the metaphor of nature as an organism. In its place was a new metaphor, one more suited for the times: nature as a machine. Go back to the quote that opened this chapter, from the great Dutch historian Eduard Jan Dijksterhuis: We now think in terms of pumps moving water around and forever-moving mill stones grinding corn (wheat), rather than cabbages and rabbits. And above all, we think in terms of watches. It was Boyle, much impressed by those wonderful time-pieces in medieval churches that not only tell time but show the motions of the planets and have moving figures that perform on the hour, who drummed home this image. Don't think of the world as crammed with life-forces, forever working to keep things going. Making specific reference to a device built in the late sixteenth century, Boyle argued rather that the world is

> like a rare clock, such as may be that at Strasbourg, where all things are so skillfully contrived that the engine being once set a-moving, all things proceed according to the artificer's first design, and the motions of the little statues that at such hours perform these or those motions do not require (like those of puppets) the peculiar interposing of the artificer or any intelligent agent employed by him, but perform their functions on particular occasions by virtue of the general and primitive contrivance of the whole engine.
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> (Boyle 1686, 12–13)

All of this was hammered home by the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes, who argued explicitly that the human body likewise is a machine. In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes discussed Englishman William Harvey's work, showing that the heart is a pump (a machine) and the similar mechanistic functioning of other bodily parts:

> This will hardly seem strange to those who know how many motions can be produced in automata or machines which can be made by human industry, although these automata employ very few wheels and other parts in comparison with the large number of bones, muscles, nerves, arteries, veins, and all the other component parts of each animal. (Descartes 1637, 41)

The machine metaphor was indeed an irresistible way of understanding, although as might be expected, going from organicism to mechanism was far from an immediate, Thomas Kuhn-type, paradigm switch – the sort of experience that St. Paul had on the route to Damascus. Johannes Kepler of all people, hero of the Scientific Revolution, was an enthusiastic organicist. Kepler – like Copernicus – was an ardent Pythagorean, the Greek school that not only discovered the famous theorem about right-angled triangles, but saw mathematical ratios and harmonies throughout the universe. Along with this, the Pythagoreans endorsed Sun worship, seeing the center of the universe as a great fire hidden from us, around which the Sun revolves. Somewhat curiously, and perhaps less pertinently, they also preached the dangers of bean consumption! (Not necessarily so very stupid – fava beans can be fatal to people from Mediterranean-bordering lands. In the TV show *Mash*, the cross-dressing Klinger falls very sick from eating such beans. His family is from Lebanon.)

As for mathematics-obsessed Copernicus and Kepler, the Sun had a major role in the thinking of Plato – likewise much influenced by the Pythagoreans and likewise much taken by mathematics. Indeed, Plato identified the Sun in our world with the Form of the Good in the eternal, unchanging world of rationality. In *Timaeus*, Plato made much of the so-called "perfect forms," that is (the five kinds of) three-dimensional objects with identical faces, arguing

that they are the ultimate constituents of physical reality. Kepler seized on this, arguing that these forms have even greater importance, for they are the basis of the way that the Great Geometer in the Sky constructed the universe. Don't think it is just chance that there are six and only six planets (including the Earth)! But even this was not enough for Kepler. "The view that there is some soul of the whole universe, directing the motions of the stars, the generation of the elements, the conservation of living creatures and plants, and finally the mutual sympathy of things above and below, is defended from the Pythagorean beliefs by Timaeus of Locri in Plato" (Harmonice Mundi 1619, in Kepler 1977, 358–9). Having given a Christian blessing to this kind of speculation, with an enthusiasm that might not have been totally appreciated either by the great Greek philosopher or the preacher from Galilee, Kepler explored in some detail the analogies between the functioning of the Earth's soul and more familiar bodily workings, arguing that

> as the body displays tears, mucus, and earwax, and also in places lymph from pustules on the face, so the Earth displays amber and bitumen; as the bladder pours out urine, so the mountains pour out rivers; as the body produces excrement of sulphurous odor and farts which can even be set on fire, so the Earth produces sulphur, subterranean fires, thunder, and lightning; and as blood is generated in the veins of an animate being, and with it sweat, which is thrust outside the body, so in the veins of the Earth are generated metals and fossils, and rainy vapor. (Kepler 1977, 363–4)

But the organic model was on its way out, and with this went final-cause thinking. The English philosopher Francis Bacon (1605) likened them to vestal virgins – "the research into Final Causes, like a virgin dedicated to God, is barren and produces nothing." Descartes was no less contemptuous. How can we ever be truly certain as to God's intentions? We should not be so arrogant as to presume we can ferret out His ways and His ends (Descartes 1644, 1, 28). You might object. Surely machine thinking does not preclude final-cause thinking. Indeed, it seems to invite it. Why make a machine like a clock? In order to tell the time. The watchmaker provides the efficient causes – grinding the gears to perfection – but the clock is made for time telling, final causes. However, this part of the metaphor was dropped. You do this all the time with metaphors. As the poet Robert Frost (1931) said about the machine metaphor – pointing out that no one thinks the world had to have "a pedal for the foot, a lever for the hand, or a button for the finger": "All metaphors break down somewhere. That is the beauty of it" (81). We are the masters of metaphor, not the slaves. In this case, scientists dropped the final cause, the purpose, thinking. Machines – the world – are seen

just as things in motion, going on eternally, governed by unbreakable laws. That is the way, particularly of the universe.

God?

Where does God fit into all of this? Most obviously, He stands in danger of being pushed aside. Within the organic metaphor He had a good role, up front. Things seem as if designed – the eye for seeing just as the telescope is for seeing, because they are designed. By God! Now, in the felicitous phrase of Dijksterhuis, God was regarded as "a retired engineer" (1961, 491). That doesn't make Him dead, anything but. However, He may have done the work: He is no longer involved. This points toward "deism" rather than "theism." We are moving away from a personal God – like the God of Christianity who stands ever ready to get involved in His creation, most obviously coming to earth in the form of Jesus for our salvation – to a god who did the work and now stands back and lets the machine take over. It's all been planned before. With the growing strength and success of the Industrial Revolution, to many such a god seemed virtually mandated. As humans using machines to make cloth are superior to humans who do it all by hand, so a god who uses unbroken law to make the world function is superior to a god who has to get his hands dirty to keep things functioning.

It is little surprise that the beginning of the eighteenth century saw a major rise in enthusiasm for deism, or that there were those who pushed the deism-favorable argument so God got ever more distant. We don't need the Bible and all of that revelation stuff. We can get all that we want from reason and nature, and if Jesus and company go by the wayside, *tant pis*. "Having proved that God requires nothing for his own sake, I shall now, the way being thus prepar'd, shew you, That the Religion of Nature is absolutely perfect and that external Revelation can neither add to nor take from its Perfection" (Tindal 1732, chapter 6). Note that, as always in these discussions, the epistemological – knowledge – takes second place to the ethical – morality. "Have they (ecclesiastics) not made external Revelation the Pretence of filling the Christian World with Animosity, Hatred, Persecution, Ruin, and Destruction, in order to get an absolute Dominion over the Consciences, Properties and Persons of the Laity" (chapter 12).

Parallel Influences

To keep things in perspective, it should be noted that the effects of the machine model on Christian belief were being paralleled and supported by

other trends and movements. One of the most important is that, with travel, Europeans came into contact with very strange non-Christian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. There is a tendency to think that, immediately, Christians – their missionaries – set themselves in opposition to the heathen, as they were called. There is support for such a supposition:

> The heathen in his blindness
> Bows down to wood and stone.
> Can we, whose souls are lighted
> With wisdom from on high,
> Can we to men benighted
> The lamp of life deny?
> Salvation! O salvation!
> The joyful sound proclaim,
> Till each remotest nation
> Has learned Messiah's Name.

This was written by Bishop Heber (1783–1826), the Bishop of Calcutta in 1823–6. But note the date. This was written at least 150 years after the beginning of commerce in the east. Early traders – hard-nosed Scottish businessmen – saw at once that religious strife was inimical to trade. Hence, if anything, they preached the value of these alien religions! And of course, a consequence was the diminution of the conviction that the Christian God is the only option. It was only in the early nineteenth century that the evangelicals, emboldened by their success in abolishing slavery in the British Empire, turned their attentions to proselytizing the faith. Until then, the authorities had kept missionaries out of India. However, with power in Parliament, Christian enthusiasts broke down the obstacles and poured into the subcontinent – with precisely the results that the skeptics forecast. Strife and unhappiness spread all around.

The other major, parallel, God-debunking process occurring alongside the effects of the machine metaphor was what became known in the nineteenth century as "higher criticism." Turning the methods of literary scholarship on the sacred books of the Christian religion – the books of the Bible – and treating them as if they were human-written works, without special divine authority. The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1677) was an early exponent, and as time went by the results were big indeed. Sacred text after sacred text stood naked, revealed as the myth and fables of illiterate peoples long ago, with but tenuous connections to reality. Doggedly, Spinoza worked through the books of the Old Testament. A sample:

> (33) The writer of the books in question not only speaks of Moses in the third person, but also bears witness to many details concerning him; for instance, "Moses talked with God"; "The Lord spoke with Moses face to face"; "Moses was the meekest of men" (Numb. 12:3); "Moses was wrath with the captains of the host"; "Moses, the man of God"; "Moses, the servant of the Lord, died"; "There was never a prophet in Israel like unto Moses," &c. (34) On the other hand, in Deuteronomy, where the law which Moses had expounded to the people and written is set forth, Moses speaks and declares what he has done in the first person: "God spake with me" (Deut. 2:1, 17, &c.), "I prayed to the Lord," &c. Except at the end of the book, when the historian, after relating the words of Moses, begins again to speak in the third person, and to tell how Moses handed over the law which he had expounded to the people in writing, again admonishing them, and further, how Moses ended his life. (36) All these details, the manner of narration, the testimony, and the context of the whole story lead to the plain conclusion that these books were written by another, and not by Moses in person. (Spinoza 1677)

Atheism?

With all of this, you might well think that atheism is just around the corner. In France, particularly, there were almost certainly atheists. One likely candidate is Denis Diderot, philosopher, art critic, and writer, best known for serving as co-founder, chief editor, and contributor to the *Encyclopédie*. His spoof on the religious life, *The Nun*, showed little respect for Christianity or its supporters. The novel started out as a joke on a friend but turned into one of the most anti-Catholic diatribes of all time. Supposedly it is the story of a young girl who is forced to join a religious order and of what happens to her when she does. As you might expect, very soon she is beaten up, stripped naked, and put in solitary in a cell. When she wants to leave, she is treated as one dead: "I was made to lie in a coffin in the centre of the choir, candles were placed on either side with a holy-water stoup, I was covered with a shroud and the prayers for the dead were recited, after which each nun, as she went out, sprinkled me with holy water and said Requiescat in pace" (Diderot [1796] 1972, 81). The unfortunate girl is made to pick up red-hot tongs and to walk on broken glass. She is made to eat bread and water while sitting on the floor and wearing a hair shirt. She is made to scourge herself while naked before the Mother Superior; although this has consequences that one might not have foreseen – or perhaps one would! The abbess is so moved that she kisses the sore spots better, and this is but a preliminary:

> By now she had raised her collar and put one of my hands on her bosom. She fell silent, and so did I. She seemed to be experiencing the most exquisite pleasure. She invited me to kiss her forehead, cheeks, eyes and mouth, and I obeyed. I don't think there was any harm in that, but her pleasure increased, and as I was only too glad to add to her happiness in any innocent way, I kissed her again on forehead, cheeks, eyes and lips. The hand she had rested on my knee wandered all over my clothing from my feet to my girdle, pressing here and there, and she gasped as she urged me in a strange, low voice to redouble my caresses, which I did. Eventually a moment came, whether of pleasure or of pain I cannot say, when she went as pale as death, closed her eyes, and her whole body tautened violently, her lips were first pressed together and moistened with a sort of foam, then they parted and she seemed to expire with a deep sigh. (Diderot [1796] 1972, 137–8)

And so it goes. You cannot trust anyone, not even a nice young Benedictine, her confessor. It is almost a relief when she ends up working in a brothel.

I won't say that this is all good, clean fun because it isn't. It isn't very pro-Christianity either. Yet, in a way, this was an exception. The Scientific Revolution was important. The coming of the machine metaphor loosened Christian belief. But, generally, it was not all-powerful. The Scottish philosopher David Hume is instructive. In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* he launches one of the all-time withering attacks on attempts to justify religion *through* reason, natural theology. So strong was he that, prudently, he waited until he was dead before publishing his diatribe. Thus, Hume on the argument from design: Who is to say that there is only one designer, and who moreover is to say that this designer got things right straight off? Our experience of complex entities is that usually this is a group effort, drawing on the experience of many attempts – sometimes failures, sometimes successes – in the past.

> But were this world ever so perfect a production, it must still remain uncertain, whether all the excellences of the work can justly be ascribed to the workman. If we survey a ship, what an exalted idea must we form of the ingenuity of the carpenter who framed so complicated, useful, and beautiful a machine? And what surprise must we feel, when we find him a stupid mechanic, who imitated others, and copied an art, which, through a long succession of ages, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations, and controversies, had been gradually improving? (Hume 1779, 20)

And was it just one workman? "And what shadow of an argument … can you produce, from your hypothesis, to prove the unity of the Deity? A great number of men join in building a house or ship, in rearing a city, in framing a

commonwealth; why may not several deities combine in contriving and framing a world?" The trouble is, of course, that you are reading your conclusion – a unique, all-powerful deity – right into your premises and then thinking that you have discovered or proved something.

All this before we even get to the problem of evil! What of "racking pains" brought on by "gouts, gravels, megrims, toothaches, rheumatisms, where the injury to the animal machinery is either small or incurable?" It is all very well to stress the good side to things; there is a bad side also. "Mirth, laughter, play, frolic, seem gratuitous satisfactions, which have no further tendency: spleen, melancholy, discontent, superstition, are pains of the same nature. How then does the Divine benevolence display itself, in the sense of you Anthropomorphites?" (22) Even worse when you turn to the moral evil (the evil brought about by human actions) as opposed to natural evil (the evil brought about by natural processes); Hume argued that neither is compatible with an all-loving God who is in control of things. The argument from design simply doesn't do what it is intended to do. Yes, but … Right at the end of the *Dialogues*, Hume (through the spokesman who seems most closely to resemble his position) does a virtual U-turn. Perhaps, after all, there is a god – even someone resembling the Christian God:

> That the works of Nature bear a great analogy to the productions of art, is evident; and according to all the rules of good reasoning, we ought to infer, if we argue at all concerning them, that their causes have a proportional analogy. But as there are also considerable differences, we have reason to suppose a proportional difference in the causes; and in particular, ought to attribute a much higher degree of power and energy to the supreme cause, than any we have ever observed in mankind. Here then the existence of a DEITY is plainly ascertained by reason: and if we make it a question, whether, on account of these analogies, we can properly call him a mind or intelligence, notwithstanding the vast difference which may reasonably be supposed between him and human minds; what is this but a mere verbal controversy? (Hume 1779, 23)

Organisms

As you might imagine, there has been much – very much – discussion about this particular passage, with today's atheistic humanists loathe to admit that their hero might in the end have had cold feet. Although one suspects that, if God does exist, Hume's feet would have been very hot, very quickly. Probably, Hume ended as a deist. The point is, however, that Hume was

not prepared to go all the way. Why? Simply because of the problem of organisms. Go back to Robert Boyle. He saw clearly that organisms fit but uncomfortably beneath or within the mechanistic world picture. In his "Disquisition about the Final Causes of Natural Things," happily taking the opportunity to make a philosophical point while putting the boot into the French, he wrote:

> For there are some things in nature so curiously contrived, and so exquisitely fitted for certain operations and uses, that it seems little less than blindness in him, that acknowledges, with the Cartesians, a most wise Author of things, not to conclude, that, though they may have been designed for other (and perhaps higher) uses, yet they were designed for this use. (Boyle 1688, 16)

Boyle continued: Supposing that "a man's eyes were made by chance, argues, that they need have no relation to a designing agent; and the use, that a man makes of them, may be either casual too, or at least may be an effect of his knowledge, not of nature's." Apart from anything else, this takes us from the chance to do science – the urge to dissect and to understand how the eye "is as exquisitely fitted to be an organ of sight, as the best artificer in the world could have framed a little engine, purposely and mainly designed for the use of seeing" (17) – but it takes us away from the designing intelligence behind it.

Boyle was being forced into playing a double game here. His stance supposedly is not something threatening to the mechanical position. It complements it! How can this be so? Boyle is distinguishing between acknowledging the use of final causes qua science and the inference qua theology from final causes to a designing god. First:

> In the bodies of animals it is oftentimes allowable for a naturalist, from the manifest and apposite uses of the parts, to collect some of the particular ends, to which nature destinated them. And in some cases we may, from the known natures, as well as from the structure, of the parts, ground probable conjectures (both affirmative and negative) about the particular offices of the parts. (Boyle 1688, 18)

Then, the science finished, one can switch to theology: "It is rational, from the manifest fitness of some things to cosmical or animal ends or uses, to infer, that they were framed or ordained in reference thereunto by an intelligent and designing agent" (19). From a study in the realm of science, of what Boyle would call "contrivance," in the realm of science, to an inference about design – or rather Design – in the realm of theology.

Organisms are booted out of science into the realm of religion. A solution, but hardly a satisfactory solution. It is true that, over the next century or

more, some good biological science was done thanks to this uneasy compromise. Naturalistic mechanistic thinking in the physical sciences. Religion, probably organismic thinking, in the biological sciences. People went on worrying, notably the great, late-eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. He turned to biology in the second half of the *Third Critique, The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). Influenced by the biology of his day, Kant came right up against the problem of purpose, of final cause. Kant was writing post-Scientific Revolution, so he wanted nothing to do with final causes in physics nor did he (qua science) want anything to do with general ends. Kant did see (as did Aristotle) that not everything to do with organisms demands a teleological analysis. Grass grows, but not in order to feed animals, although it is true that they take advantage of the grown grass. However, when it comes to organisms, Kant saw that they do seem to be organized, and that this organization leads to a kind of functioning – survival and reproduction. This means in some sense that the parts of organisms are both cause and effect, with the kind of forward-looking, value-impregnated dimension that one expects in a world of purpose. The eye, for instance, brings about survival and reproduction, which in turn brings about another eye. This seems to take us beyond the machine metaphor.

> In a watch one part is the instrument for the motion of another, but one wheel is not the efficient cause for the production of the other: one part is certainly present for the sake of the other but not because of it. Hence the producing cause of the watch and its form is not contained in the nature (of this matter), but outside of it, in a being that can act in accordance with an idea of a whole that is possible through its causality. (Kant 1790, 32)

Kant continues that it is a matter of organization or even self-organization. "This principle, or its definition, states: An organized product of nature is that in which everything is an end and reciprocally a means as well. Nothing in it is in vain, purposeless, or to be ascribed to a blind mechanism of nature" (33).

At one level, it seems that Kant is introducing a vital force of some kind, the sort that we associate with the early twentieth-century French philosopher Henri Bergson (1907).

> An organized being is thus not a mere machine, for that has only a motive power, while the organized being possesses in itself a formative power, and indeed one that it communicates to the matter, which does not have it (it organizes the latter): thus it has a self-propagating formative power, which cannot be explained through the capacity for movement alone (that is, mechanism). (Kant 1790, 33)

Kant certainly agrees with the organicists that teleology is ineliminable. But Kant doesn't see that the ontological given, as with Bergson's *élan vital*, is really allowable in the Newtonian world. (It isn't!) Hence, Kant is driven to the conclusion that the teleology of biology is merely heuristic. It is a prop for needy humans.

> The concept of a thing as in itself a natural end is therefore not a constitutive concept of the understanding or of reason, but it can still be a regulative concept for the reflecting power of judgment, for guiding research into objects of this kind and thinking over their highest ground in accordance with a remote analogy with our own causality in accordance with ends; not, of course, for the sake of knowledge of nature or of its original ground, but rather for the sake of the very same practical faculty of reason in us in analogy with which we consider the cause of that purposiveness.
>
> (Kant 1790, 36)

Kant was caught in a difficult bind. As the child of Pietist parents, Kant thought God is responsible for all of this. However, given his underlying philosophy and theology – again, probably Pietist influence, given its prioritizing faith over reason – Kant could not bring God into the scientific discussion. But he realized that you cannot do biology without final-cause thinking. So the best he could do was to say teleology is a guide, a heuristic. He could not say why, ultimately, we need it, but there we are. Although that did not stop Kant from being rather nasty about biology. You want to make the life sciences equal to the physical sciences? Fuhgeddaboudit!

> [W]e can boldly say that it would be absurd for humans even to make such an attempt or to hope that there may yet arise a Newton who could make comprehensible even the generation of a blade of grass according to natural laws that no intention has ordered; rather, we must absolutely deny this insight to human beings. (37)

Natural Selection

And so we come to Charles Darwin! The New Atheists regard Darwin's theory as the "greatest scripture killer" ever (Coyne 2015, xii) – an inference that would come as a considerable surprise to Darwin himself (Richards and Ruse 2016). He started life as a conventional Anglican, became a deist in his early twenties, and this lasted most of his life, right through the writing of the *Origin* (Browne 1995, 2002). This theological stance was an important component in his becoming an evolutionist. Deism sees a world of unbroken law,

with an Unmoved Mover behind it. Evolution is support for this position, rather than refutation. Toward the end of his life, Darwin became an agnostic. Like many late-nineteenth-century former Christians, it was theology, not science, that drove him away from any form of God-belief. Darwin could not stomach the fact that his father and older brother, two of the finest men he had ever known, would go to hell because of their non-belief. Like almost all those former Christians, Darwin was never an atheist.

Indeed, in the *Origin* itself, Christian metaphors and tropes abound. Notably, the tree of life. The really crucial influence was, thanks to Darwin's university training, the thought of the Reverend Archdeacon William Paley, author of numerous textbooks, including *Natural Theology* (1802), where he argued that the existence of God is shown by the design-like nature of organisms. The eye is like a telescope, the telescope had a designer, hence the eye had a designer – the Great Optician in the Sky. It is absurd to deny this. Darwin used to joke that he could have written all of Paley's arguments by heart; except it wasn't a joke (Darwin 1958). The *Origin of Species* is as design-like obsessed as is *Natural Theology*. Here is a typical passage – the language and the argumentation could have been lifted, without change and quite unself-consciously, straight from Aristotle's *On the Parts of Animals*:

> In certain cases the successive steps of variation might supervene, from causes of which we are wholly ignorant, at a very early period of life, or each step might be inherited at an earlier period than that at which it first appeared. In either case (as with the short-faced tumbler) the young or embryo would closely resemble the mature parent-form. We have seen that this is the rule of development in certain whole groups of animals, as with cuttle-fish and spiders, and with a few members of the great class of insects, as with Aphis. With respect to the final cause of the young in these cases not undergoing any metamorphosis, or closely resembling their parents from their earliest age, we can see that this would result from the two following contingencies; firstly, from the young, during a course of modification carried on for many generations, having to provide for their own wants at a very early stage of development, and secondly, from their following exactly the same habits of life with their parents; for in this case, it would be indispensable for the existence of the species, that the child should be modified at a very early age in the same manner with its parents, in accordance with their similar habits. (Darwin 1859, 448)

Here, however, we do find the place where Darwin moved on. We have now seen how the Scientific Revolution, taking us from Copernicus at the

beginning of the sixteenth century to Newton at the end of the seventeenth century was, above all, a change in root metaphors (Ruse 2013, 2017, 2019). From the Greeks down to the Revolution, the world was seen through the lens of an organism. This was the ordering principle of understanding, and it was the very thing that Darwin was changing forever. The design does seem to be part of the nature of organisms. It is a matter of removing the underlying metaphysics. Darwin gave the definitive answer (Ruse 2017). He did not deny teleology, and talked happily of final causes, meaning that it makes good sense to ask the purpose of features like the eye (Lennox 1993). But the eye is not a product of an external designer or of internal forces. Nor is the teleology purely heuristic. Organic features are products of natural selection:

> Let it be borne in mind how infinitely complex and close-fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life. Can it, then, be thought improbable, seeing that variations useful to man have undoubtedly occurred, that other variations useful in some way to each being in the great and complex battle of life, should sometimes occur in the course of thousands of generations? If such do occur, can we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind? On the other hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection. (81)

The eye helped the possessor in the past, so we assume it will help the possessor in the future. It is the *purpose*, the *function*, the *end* of the eye – the *final cause* of the eye – to let us see. We could be wrong, but that is how we think, and how we will continue to think unless and until changed circumstances introduce new selective pressures. In a dark cave, eyes have no function, and at once natural selection sets to work to make eyes less susceptible to infection and the like, even at the expense of eyes still being able to see in the light.

God Again

Darwin is important in our story. Not because he refuted Christianity but because he completed the Scientific Revolution. Final causes can be subsumed under the machine metaphor. The world is to be seen mechanistically

as well as from a reductionist perspective. So bringing our tale to an end, what of God? Richard Dawkins (1986, 6) has said, truly: "Although atheism might have been logically tenable before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist." Note that this does not say that you must now be an atheist, although Dawkins certainly thinks you should be. But the argument from design no longer has compulsive power. The right position is that of John Henry Newman: "I believe in design because I believe in God; not in a God because I see design" (Newman 1973, 97). As a Christian, one believes on faith all about the Christian God, and then one fleshes this out by looking at the world and using reason.

Are we back to square one? In the end, did the Scientific Revolution make no significance to the atheism question? In one sense, that is true. You can be a Darwinian, a mechanist, and go on being a committed Christian – God as Creator, humans made in the image of God, Jesus the son of God who came down to earth for our salvation. Especially if you are a Kierkegaardian Christian believing that faith is all and reason is nothing (Davies and Ruse 2021). As Martin Luther said, don't be led astray by that whore reason. And you can easily be a deist, as was Darwin quite openly in the *Origin*. "To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual" (Darwin 1859, 488). This passage went unchanged through all six editions, until 1872 – by which time Darwin himself had moved to being an agnostic.

But in another sense, this is entirely to miss the story. The Scientific Revolution did make a difference. It is a different, colder, less friendly world. One stripped of value and purpose. Natural selection occurs only because there is an ongoing struggle for existence:

> A struggle for existence inevitably follows from the high rate at which all organic beings tend to increase. Every being, which during its natural lifetime produces several eggs or seeds, must suffer destruction during some period of its life, and during some season or occasional year, otherwise, on the principle of geometrical increase, its numbers would quickly become so inordinately great that no country could support the product. Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life. It is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms; for in this case there can be no

> artificial increase of food, and no prudential restraint from marriage. Although some species may be now increasing, more or less rapidly, in numbers, all cannot do so, for the world would not hold them. (64)

As Darwin himself saw, writing to his friend the American botanist Asa Gray, this makes for a lot of misery:

> With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me. – I am bewildered. – I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I sh[d]. wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed. (Darwin 1985, 8, 224)

Thomas Hardy, the great novelist, raised an Anglican, knew the score. Consider his poem "Hap." Even if he exists, God doesn't care:

> If but some vengeful god would call to me
> From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
> Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
> That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"
> Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
> Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
> Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
> Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.
> But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
> And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
> —Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
> And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan …
> These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
> Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

A bleak picture indeed. Any meaning to life we put in ourselves; we do not find it. Perhaps in the end, the existentialists were right:

> Existentialism is not so much an atheism in the sense that it would exhaust itself attempting to demonstrate the nonexistence of God; rather, it affirms that even if God were to exist, it would make no difference—that is our point of view. It is not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the real problem is not one of his existence; what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of God. (Sartre 1948, based on a lecture given in 1945)

And yet? Must we declare defeat? I think not.

> My atheist existentialism … declares that God does not exist, yet there is still a being in whom existence precedes essence, a being which exists before being defined by any concept, and this being is man or, as Heidegger puts it, human reality.
>
> That means that man first exists, encounters himself and emerges in the world, to be defined afterwards. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. It is man who conceives himself, who propels himself toward existence. Man becomes nothing other than what is actually done, not what he will want to be.

This is a bleak world indeed! We must search within ourselves! "Existence before essence." "Condemned to freedom." I'll take it! Especially if the alternative is Christian theism.

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15

The Scottish Enlightenment

DAVID MCNAUGHTON AND DAVID PURDIE

The movement of thought and culture in Europe now known as the Enlightenment reached its peak in the eighteenth century. Having its roots in the humanism of the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, it embraced a confident and optimistic outlook on the prospects for human progress. Human reason, in the guise of scientific advance, could not only understand the world but also change it. Kepler and Newton in the seventeenth century had uncovered the elegant and simple principles that lay behind the cosmos. The puzzling trajectories of the planets against the background of the fixed stars proved impossible to account for on the old Ptolemaic astronomy without the introduction of ad hoc complexity. Planetary motion, however, became completely comprehensible once it was understood that they moved in elliptical orbits round our sun. Newton showed that the force that kept the planets in their orbits was one and the same as the force that caused ripe apples to drop towards the ground. All motion – celestial and terrestrial – could be reduced to three laws of motion, expressible by simple mathematical formulas.

As the laws of physics were being uncovered, so were the laws of economics becoming better understood, promising a more rational approach to taxation and trade. It could only be a matter of time before a science of human nature revealed the laws that govern our own thoughts and behaviours. At the same time, advances in stock breeding and a better understanding of soil science were transforming agriculture, while water and steam power were being harnessed to manufacture items on an industrial scale. Human reason could thus be employed to scrutinize and transform society; only ignorance and superstition stood in the way of an endless improvement of the human condition.

Christianity, which had been the dominant worldview in most of Europe for over a thousand years, fell under suspicion for including much that

seemed merely fabulous. The biblical narratives contained much that was at odds with modern science: tales of people living over 900 years, of walls falling at the blast of trumpets, of visitations by angels, of miraculous healings, of the turning of water into wine, and of the dead coming back to life. Superstition pervaded the practice of Christianity, in particular its threat of dire retribution in an afterlife, giving the priesthood power over a credulous populace. Holy relics were venerated and thought to have special powers; the bones of saints and fragments of the true cross were everywhere to be found. Although the Reformation had swept away some of these superstitions in Protestant countries, many remained. Women who were thought to be witches had been tortured, drowned, or burned at the stake in the reigns of Elizabeth and James I. The Enlightenment promised a future in which the light of science would banish such darkness forever.

Thinkers influenced by the Enlightenment reacted in two ways. Some rejected Christianity altogether, as did most of the French *philosophes*, while others thought it contained a core element of truth once all that was fanciful or historically dubious had been stripped out. Prominent among the latter were the Deists. They denied that God directly intervenes in human history, either by performing miracles, inspiring prophets, or by revealing truths about himself that could not be known merely from the examination of his creation. They therefore rejected the specifically Christian doctrines of the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the Atonement. God administers the universe wisely by general laws, but does not provide guidance or succour to each individual.

The Act of Union with England in 1707 ushered in an unparalleled period of economic and cultural growth in Scotland, and especially in its capital, Edinburgh, which became a centre of intellectual ferment and scientific endeavour. As a result, by 1820 it attracted from the poet Hugh Williams the sobriquet 'The Athens of the North'. Just as traditional Greek religion had come under scrutiny from Socrates and others, so orthodox Christian beliefs were questioned and debated in the light of the new scientific understanding of the world and of the place of humans in it.

The wider debate between orthodoxy and more 'progressive' elements was mirrored in a division within the Presbyterian Kirk between 'High Flyers' and 'Moderates'. The former wanted to enforce strict Calvinist orthodoxy on the populace, while the latter were more tolerant of dissent. Leading figures in the Moderate Party themselves contributed to the scholarly activities of the Enlightenment, in literary, historical, philosophical, and scientific endeavours. A number of them held university posts, including John Simson

(1688?–1740), who was Professor of Divinity at Glasgow from 1708, and Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), who occupied the Chair of Moral Philosophy in the same university from 1729. The danger, if one belonged to this wing of the Kirk, of being hauled before the General Assembly is illustrated by the case of Simson (Hutcheson's tutor). Although never convicted of heresy, he was, among other things, suspended from his Chair for his views on original sin, free-will, and the conversion of the heathen.

The most prominent figure in this debate was David Hume (1711–76), arguably the greatest philosopher Britain has produced. While loved and admired by all who knew him, Hume became notorious as the Great Infidel (as James Boswell styled him) since he took a puckish delight in attacking the most cherished arguments for Christianity. Widely believed to be an atheist, in 1756 Hume was in danger of formal prosecution by the 'High Flyers' – the ultra-conservative wing of the Kirk. From this he was only saved by the efforts of his clerical friends of the Moderate wing. These included such as the historian William Robertson, minister of Greyfriars Kirk, and Hugh Blair of the High Kirk of St. Giles. Yet Hume himself not only denied that he was an atheist but doubted that it was a tenable position, as a famous anecdote illustrates. While Hume was private secretary to the British Ambassador to France, he dined with Baron d'Holbach, a leading *philosophe*. As Diderot reported in a letter to his lover Sophie Volland, Hume

> took it into his head to remark to the Baron that he did not believe in atheists, that he had never seen any. The Baron said to him:
>
> 'Count how many we are here.'
>
> 'We are eighteen.'
>
> The Baron added: 'It isn't too bad a showing to be able to point out to you fifteen at once: the three others haven't made up their minds.'
>
> (Mossner 1954, 483)

The accusation of atheism can only be understood in context. As we now use the term, an atheist is typically someone who denies the existence of any type of god. In this usage, to have any sort of religious belief is incompatible with atheism. In Hume's time, however, any serious deviation from Christian orthodoxy made one liable to such an accusation. It was enough to be dubbed an atheist that one did not believe in the *right kind* of God. In denying that he was an atheist, Hume was clearly using the word in its modern sense – for he was not wholly without religious belief. In fact, as we shall see, Hume holds both atheism and agnosticism to be untenable. He appears to have been what we might dub an attenuated theist: he held that no-one could seriously doubt

the existence of an Author of Nature, but what this amounted to was very little, and nothing that could offer comfort to Christianity.

Hume's writings touch on many religious questions, including the genesis of religious beliefs, the contrast between superstition and enthusiasm, the permissibility of suicide, and the immortality of the soul. We, however, shall focus on the two issues to which he devotes most attention. These are two central arguments for Christian theism: the Argument from Design, and the Argument from Miracles. We shall not, however, understand Hume's discussion of each without appreciating the style in which he treats them, which is dictated, in part, by a need to avoid unnecessary confrontation with the authorities. These various rhetorical strategies can sometimes make it unclear what exactly Hume is claiming. First, Hume, like Socrates before him, is an inveterate ironist. Ironic distance enables him ostensibly to undermine or deny the controversial conclusions that follow from his arguments, while trusting that the alert reader will see through this ploy. Second, Hume frequently attacks a safe target intending the reader to recognize that his fire is also directed against a position on which it would be dangerous to mount a frontal assault. Hume's usual whipping boy is Roman Catholicism. In his time, and in Calvinist Scotland, one could be as rude about it as one liked, but Hume's real target is all versions of Christianity, and not just one branch of it. Finally, Hume often employs the dialogue form. In the hands of lesser authors, a dialogue is often simply an alternative way of presenting and supporting the author's thesis, but at its best a dialogue presents the interplay of ideas while leaving the audience to draw its own conclusions. Hume is a master of the form, and his skill reaches a peak in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.* As he wrote to Adam Smith ten days before his death, he found on revising them, that 'nothing can be more cautiously and more artfully written' (Greig, 1932, II, 334). So artfully constructed in fact that to this day commentators disagree about exactly what Hume was up to, which may well have been Hume's intention. For the topic was so explosive that Hume chose not to make it public in his lifetime but arranged for it to be published posthumously by his lawyer nephew and namesake.

The *Dialogues* centre round three characters: Demea, Cleanthes, and Philo. Demea represents those who favour abstract arguments for the existence of a First Cause. That cause must be without limitations – perfect in every respect – but finite humans can have no clear idea of just what that involves: 'The essence of that supreme mind, his attributes, the manner of his existence, the very nature of his duration; these and every particular, which

regards so divine a Being, are mysterious to men' (*Dialogues* Part II; Wollheim 1963, 113).

Cleanthes, on the other hand, employs an argument for God's existence that stresses the similarities between humans and the deity:

> Look round the world: contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines . . . All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man. (*Dialogues* Part II; Wollheim 1963, 115–16)

Philo, the sceptic, questions the arguments of both parties. He joins with Cleanthes in attacking Demea, but then joins with Demea in rebutting Cleanthes' claim that the cause of the universe must have a mind and other powers similar to, though greater than, those of humans. Eventually Demea drops out of the discussion, leaving Cleanthes and Philo to explore Philo's objections to the Argument from Design more deeply. It is clear that Cleanthes' argument is the central topic of the *Dialogues*, and so we shall focus on Philo's criticisms of that argument.

What is an argument from analogy, and what are its rules? To say that one thing is analogous to another is to say that they resemble each other in certain respects. An argument from analogy typically takes us from something observed to the unobserved. In the case of the argument considered here, it takes us to an unobserved cause. Suppose doctors determine that some disease is caused by a virus, which they have been able to detect. Were they to come across a new disease, markedly similar to, but not quite the same as, that first disease they would be justified in arguing that the second disease is also caused by a virus, similar but not identical to the first virus. Such arguments are the very stuff of scientific discovery, and no-one disputes their cogency. They do not establish their conclusions with certainty; it is always possible that two phenomena, which seem very similar in many respects, have entirely disparate causes. But if the similarities are very close, we can have a high degree of confidence in the conclusion.

Philo's strategy is not to deny that such arguments have an appropriate use, but to contend that the issue under consideration, namely the origin of

the universe, is a special case. It differs in a number of ways from other arguments by analogy, and all these differences greatly weaken the argument. We will briefly outline some of his main objections and consider how powerful they are.

Philo's first and most obvious point is that the analogy is strained. The universe is not very like a typical product of human ingenuity, such as a watch or a house. But the less similar the effects are, the less likely are the causes to be similar. There is an equally obvious response to this objection: for an argument from analogy to work, the analogy only has to hold *in the relevant respects*. The universe is, in many respects, very unlike a watch. But it may be very similar in the ways required for the argument to go through. The *relevant* similarity is that both involve intricate coordination between their various parts to produce a whole that works in a regular and ordered manner.

Philo then argues that there are a number of other ways in which the Design Argument differs from the standard form of the argument from analogy. Normally, we will have seen many examples of the causal process in question before venturing to infer an unobserved cause. For example, we have seen many houses being built, and followed the progress of their construction from laying the foundation to finishing the roof. In each case we have observed that they are built by humans with certain sorts of tools. That repeated observation licenses us in assuming that all such structures were built by us in similar ways, even where we have not observed them being built. But the case of the universe is markedly different. There is but one universe, and so we have never observed any other universes being built. Since we have never observed the cause of a universe, we cannot argue from an *observed* cause of other universes to an unobserved cause of this one.

Philo is, of course, correct in claiming that an explanation of the origins of the unique universe will differ in this way from an explanation of the origins of houses we may come across. But how telling is this dissimilarity against Cleanthes' argument? Not very. We often face this difficulty, and arguments from analogy are designed to overcome it. There are many cases where we wish to explain phenomena whose causes are unobserved, and perhaps unobservable. Unless science could postulate causes in such cases, by the use of analogy, knowledge could not progress. And, as Paley (1802) later argued, in some cases we can be very confident of such inferences when we come across a particular type of object for the first time. Suppose you had never seen a watch before and came across one lying on the ground. An examination of its intricate structure would license you in assuming that it

was created for a purpose by an intelligent mind. That inference would be strengthened a little if you were familiar with watch manufacture, but you can have considerable confidence in your conclusion without that knowledge. That we have not seen other universes created may weaken the force of the inference to some degree, but does not invalidate its general form. Indeed, if Philo were right, then science itself would be mistaken in trying to uncover the origins of our universe.

Philo's other objections are aimed at showing that the argument moves too quickly in overlooking other possibilities. Why suppose the universe to be created by one god rather than by a group of gods? Why suppose that order can only be produced by minds? Plants scatter seeds and those seeds develop into other complex plants; why should the order in the universe not be explained by vegetative reproduction? If we are going to suppose the creator to be like us, why not go the whole hog and suppose them to have a body like ours? Why not suppose that matter was constantly rearranging itself by chance but that none of these patterns were capable of lasting until, eventually, a stable pattern that could be maintained over aeons emerged?

Some of these objections are more cogent than others, but the cumulative effect of Philo's many ingenious suggestions is to weaken rather than wholly to undermine the Argument for Design. However, there is a surprising reversal in the last part of the *Dialogues*. Philo recants and appears to agree that Cleanthes' argument is sound. His arguments against have been merely captious. If, as it is natural to suppose, we think of Philo as Hume's mouthpiece, this recantation is puzzling. What, we might ask, was all the fuss about? Some have therefore doubted that Philo represents Hume's own view. This seems a rather desperate interpretation, since Philo's types of objection can all be found in other places in Hume's own writings.

There is a simpler explanation, once we remind ourselves of Hume's love of irony and his care to conceal his views from superficial readers. At first, Philo's capitulation seems absolute: '[N]o-one has a deeper impression of religion impressed on his mind, or pays more profound adoration to the Divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason, in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of Nature' (*Dialogues* Part II; Wollheim 1963, 189). But what does this concession amount to? As it turns out, very little. A little later, Philo claims that the dispute between theism and atheism is merely verbal. How so? It is universally agreed that there are both similarities and differences between the works of nature and things made by humans. The cause of the universe, then, bears some remote analogy to human intelligence. The atheist cannot deny this, and consequently 'can

never possibly be in earnest' (*Dialogues* Part XII; Wollheim 1963, 193). The theist can go no further. They agree, then, about the facts, and disagree only about the terms. The one is struck by the similarities between human minds and the cause of the universe; the other is struck by the dissimilarities.

> There is a species of controversy, which, from the very nature of human ideas, is involved in perpetual ambiguity, and can never, by any precaution or any definitions, be able to reach a reasonable certainty or precision. These are the circumstances concerning the degrees of any quality or circumstance ... [T]he dispute concerning Theism is of this nature, and consequently is merely verbal, or perhaps, if possible, still more incurably ambiguous. (*Dialogues* Part XII; Wollheim 1963, 193)

What makes a dispute merely verbal? A dispute is substantial if it is one about the facts of the case, and not merely about the meanings of terms. But many disputes turn out to concern disagreements about what is and is not covered in the use of some term. How big does a bush need to be before we classify it as a tree? How many grains of sand does it take to make a heap? Where exactly does yellow fade into orange and orange into red? How many hairs must I lose before I can be described as bald? There is no precise cut-off point in the application of these terms, so disputes about the precise location of the boundary between, say, a bush and a tree are *merely* about the correct use of terms. Such disputes are typically about cases where we have a continuum: woody plants, for example, can be ranked from the smallest to the largest. We can agree about the classification of examples at each end of the spectrum. Someone who claimed that a massive oak is a bush, or that the roses in my garden grow on trees, would thereby show that they did not understand those words. But the boundaries in such cases are fuzzy, so that usage does not dictate where the line should be drawn. It is characteristic of verbal disputes that the disputants can agree about all the facts but disagree about which term best describes the case. We may agree about the number of hairs on my head and yet disagree as to whether I am bald. My spouse and I may agree that we want to paint our living room *this* colour, but disagree as to whether it is a strong yellow or a pale orange. Such disputes are about nothing significant: we may agree to differ in our use of words, or we may agree on some arbitrary line. It makes no substantial difference which we do. In the case of theism, then, we can both agree that the cause of the universe bears some remote analogy to the human mind. Struck by the similarities, you may wish to call that cause God; struck by the differences, I may not. But,

Hume claims, this is solely a dispute about what we should *call* the cause of the universe.

The theist might hope to draw some comfort from Philo's concession that the cause of the universe bears some remote analogy to the human mind. But Hume subverts even that comfort. Everything is both similar to and different from everything else in innumerable ways. The rotting of a turnip and the structure of human thought 'bear some remote analogy to each other'. The principle that produced order in the universe bears 'some remote inconceivable analogy to the other operations of Nature, and among the rest to the economy of human mind and thought' (*Dialogues* Part XII; Wollheim 1963, 194). Hume's comparison opens up one final ironic twist so that the attentive reader may understand how little he has really conceded. Since the rotting of a turnip is one of the operations of nature, the principle behind the order in the universe might, with equal justice, be thought of as remotely analogous to a decomposing heap of organic matter.

There remains a puzzle. Or, rather, two related puzzles. First, why does Hume reject agnosticism as the obvious response to these reasonings? He has both Cleanthes and Philo agree that suspension of belief is not possible. Second, in several places, whether in his own person or that of Philo, Hume declares his belief in a creator and a commitment to religion in unequivocal terms that do not fit well with the sceptical tone of the *Dialogues*. We have quoted one such statement from Philo above, and the opening paragraph of Hume's *Natural History of Religion* contains a similarly categorical pronouncement: 'The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion' (Wollheim 1963, 31). Various explanations can be offered. Maybe Hume was covering his tracks so as to avoid the wrath of the ecclesiastical authorities. Or maybe this is just another example of Hume's irony – what are the 'primary principles' of 'genuine' theism? But another explanation could be offered. Hume is not only sceptical about religion, but about many things. He holds that no *arguments* can be found to justify our most ordinary beliefs, such as that there is an external world of material objects, or that the future will resemble the past. But Hume is not advocating that we discard these beliefs because we cannot justify them. Far from it. Not only would it be disastrous, it is in fact psychologically impossible. The sceptical conclusions we may come to in philosophical reflection cannot survive the light of day and the pressures of normal life. As Hume puts it, nature is too strong for us. Try as we might, we cannot help believing in a world of things that

will go on in the same orderly way that they always have. These are expectations that animals, including human animals, share; and if they did not they wouldn't live for very long. But, and this is Hume's sceptical point, we do not believe them *because* we have found rational grounds for so doing. Just the reverse; we believe them *in spite of* having no reason to do so.

It may be that Hume takes the same approach to religious belief. We cannot help believing that the universe has an intelligent designer; not because there are good rational grounds for this belief, for there are none. Rather, we believe because it is natural for us to believe. Reason does not validate religious belief, but then religious belief does not require such support. That would explain why Hume rejects agnosticism as a tenable position: suspension of belief in a designer is psychologically impossible. Note, however, how very thin the *content* of this natural belief is. To believe merely in an intelligent designer of the cosmos gives us no clue as to the intentions of that designer and no guidance on how to live. It has no practical relevance. And Hume remained implacably opposed to the doctrines and dogmas of Christianity,[1] no more so than in his discussion of miracles.

While in the *Dialogues* Hume is circumspect and cautious, in the chapter "Of miracles" in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* the gloves come off. Miracles are a central part of the New Testament story, culminating in the greatest miracle, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Apologists for Christianity often point to the difficulty of explaining away the empty tomb as strong evidence for their faith. In the second part of the chapter, Hume deplores the credulity and love of the marvellous to be found in all ages, especially among ignorant and barbarous nations. He talks of delusions, and even describes the account of the resurrection as 'a cheat' (Wollheim 1963, 224). While Hume's provocative language may have offended his contemporaries, the philosophical interest in the chapter is not to be found in these polemics, but in the sober argument of the first part of the chapter. There, Hume sets out a general and abstract argument intended to show not that miracles are impossible, but that we could never (except in extraordinary circumstances) have reason to believe one. The argument is elegant and simple.

A miracle, according to Hume, is a violation of a law of nature brought about directly or indirectly by a deity. What is a law of nature, in Hume's view? In some cases, causes only sometimes produce certain effects. For example, heavy rain sometimes causes flooding, and sometimes not. Where, however, events of type A are connected to events of type B by a law, there is an

1 As can be seen in Boswell's (1777) extraordinary account of his last interview with Hume.

unbroken connection between As and Bs. Whenever there is an A there is a B. We are therefore only justified in supposing that two events are governed by a law of nature if no-one has ever observed a counter-instance. For example, we observe that objects always fall to the centre of gravity, that animals cannot live without oxygen, and that people who have been dead for three days stay so. If these things were not always observed to be so we should not suppose a law of nature to be in play. How, then, should we judge a report that a law has been violated? 'A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as a full *proof* of the future existence of that event' (Wollheim 1963, 206).

Laws of nature are those regularities for which we have the strongest possible evidence. Therefore, to show that a law had been violated we would need even stronger evidence of the miracle than we have for the existence of the law: unimpeachable and numerous witnesses, all possibilities of mistake ruled out, and so on: '[N]o testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavours to establish' (Wollheim 1963, 211). Hume was very proud of this argument; so proud that he ends the section with a characteristically humorous ironic flourish:

> We may conclude, that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: and whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe whatever is most contrary to custom and experience.[2] (Wollheim 1963, 226)

2 Remarkably, Hume's irony was lost on at least one reader. In the preface to his book on Hume in the Famous Scots series, Henry Calderwood (1899) claims that, though Hume was in his day held to be an infidel, it is now time to 'place him in a truer light, to show that he is not an infidel, that he scorns even the name of deist', and that the man who himself challenged the evidence for his belief in miracles maintains 'that the Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one'. So readers may even be able to find, in Hume, a witness for Christianity whose testimony is in some respects the more valuable since beset with so many and such grave doubts (5–6).

In a later passage on Hume's treatment of miracles, Calderwood writes with an unconscious irony that would have delighted Hume: 'Hume's attempt here to lift religion out of the sphere of reason proved a failure . . . The whole discussion as to proof and probability, keenly sustained on both sides, witnesses to the impossibility of religion being limited to faith' (98).

This argument has, however, been subjected to serious criticism. Indeed, one recent book on the topic is entitled *Hume's Abject Failure* (2000). One fairly obvious difficulty is that it is hard to see how, on Hume's principles, observational evidence could lead us to conclude that what we supposed to be a law was not so. Suppose that hitherto all observed As have been followed by Bs, but now someone reports an exception. What is the rational thing to conclude, on Hume's account? That no such observation was made because the person making the report was misled or lying. We continue, therefore, to maintain that all *observed* As are followed by Bs. Now suppose another exception is reported. Since the connection between observed As and Bs is still unbroken (for the last *supposed* observation of an exception has been discounted as inaccurate) then the evidence against the new observation being genuine is just as strong as it was when the first counter-instance was reported. So it is rational to conclude that this observation also is unsound. However many individual observations of a counter-instance are reported, the evidence that each of them is mistaken will, on Hume's account, remain just as overwhelming as ever.

Maybe this problem can be fixed. Hume shows himself aware of the difficulty when he discusses the case of the Indian prince who refused to believe that water can become solid in cold climates. As Hume points out, that was a perfectly rational stance, given his limited evidence. However, the sudden turning of liquid water into a solid at 0 °C, though extraordinary, is not miraculous, and observing the behaviour of water in different temperatures would have shown that the solidification of water breaks no law. We need to observe phenomena in the widest possible number of contexts and, if necessary, be prepared to reject or revise putative laws of nature.

Is Hume correct in his claim that we should attach such great evidential weight to the fact that past observations have been uniform? As the story of the Indian prince illustrates, the world is full of surprises, and intrinsically unlikely events happen all the time. Our observations are limited in time and space, as the story of the Indian prince also illustrates, so why assume that what we have observed heretofore is compelling evidence about what will happen in the future, or in a new environment? A sceptic about miracles might reply that it is causally or physically *impossible* for dead people to revive after three days, or for water to turn instantaneously into wine. However, *Hume* is in no position to make such a claim, for on his account formulations of laws of nature merely describe what *does* happen, not what *must* happen; he famously argued that there is no necessity in the case. Hume, of all people, has no right to assume that nature is uniform. He thought he had discovered

an argument against the credibility of miracles that would serve as 'an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion' (Wollheim 1963, 206). He was mistaken.

Maybe Hume would be justified in drawing a weaker conclusion. Towards the end of the chapter, Hume writes: 'I beg the limitations here made may be remarked, when I say, that a miracle can never be proved, *so as to be the foundation of a system of religion*' (Wollheim 1963, 223; our emphasis). One way of understanding the italicized clause would be this. Hume may be denying that reports of a miracle could serve as an epistemic foundation for adopting a religious worldview. If your worldview contains no room for a personal God who might intervene in the world from time to time, then reports of a religious miracle ought not lead you to change your view. Why? Because, as the example of the Indian prince shows, what you have good reason to believe in a particular case depends on your total background beliefs and evidence; if there is no place for miraculous interventions in your worldview, then you will be justified in assuming mistake or deception in such a report. If, however, you have already adopted a religious perspective, then you would be justified in using much lower standards when assessing the credibility of such reports. Indeed, you might be *expecting* miracles to occur. On this view, the religious believer is within his epistemic rights in accepting some reports of miraculous happenings, while the atheist or sceptic is equally within her rights in rejecting those same reports. This may well be the correct conclusion, but it is markedly less dramatic than the one for which Hume was arguing.

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16

Al-Ghazālī

SHOAIB AHMED MALIK

Introduction

In the late modern period, western powers began to study eastern cultures, religions, languages, and territories other than their own under the label of orientalism. In his groundbreaking book, Edward Said (1978) came to eventually redefine what orientalism really was. In his understanding it was the rationalization of a Eurocentric worldview within which the 'others' (eastern civilizations) were depicted as inferior, intellectually inadequate, and regressive as a means of justifying the political, cultural, and intellectual superiority of the west. While much can be critiqued of Said's project, it is nonetheless not absolutely untrue. One can find evidence of clear biases against the east in the works of orientalists, with Islam being no exception (Quinn 2008). It is within this matrix that certain ideas started to develop that are still latched on to in popular understanding today, adding to the already damaging vitriol against Islam in the contemporary imagination and rhetoric. Of these problematic notions is the idea that a twelfth-century Islamic scholar by the name of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111)[1] was responsible for the decline of the Muslim world. He alone doomed the Muslim world by insulting the role of reason, shunning philosophy and the natural sciences from the Muslim world, and declared his position with the stamp of Islamic orthodoxy. It is this particular and mistaken understanding that appears in some writings of modern atheists which will be scrutinized.

At this stage it may be helpful to demarcate between the banishment thesis – that is, al-Ghazālī's censure of the natural sciences and philosophy – and the decline thesis – that is, the historical decline of these fields in the Muslim world. Within the decline thesis we can further divide a decline caused by al-Ghazālī and a decline caused by other (non-Ghazālīan) factors.

[1] For the unaware reader, biographical information on al-Ghazālī can be found by reviewing any of the relevant references. As a starting point I would recommend Griffel (2009).

My thesis here is a negation of the banishment thesis which immediately has implications for the first decline thesis. As will be seen during the progression of this chapter, once it becomes clear that al-Ghazālī never banished philosophy or science, he cannot have caused the decline of these fields in the Muslim world, at least when understood by his own account.

Al-Ghazālī and Contemporary Atheism

Of the various criticisms levelled against the works of new atheists, two recent books thoroughly detail how they misconstrue and inaccurately depict the historical claims they've made (Painter 2014; Johnstone 2018). These books provide a lot of clarity in response to atheist generalizations and oversimplifications, but they do not address the persistent myth of al-Ghazālī's central role in banishing philosophy and the natural sciences, after which, it is claimed, they went into decline in the Muslim world in comparison to the western world. While the four horsemen of 'new atheism' – Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens – project Islam and Muslims as the antithesis of the western ideal, as its irrational and barbaric other (Malik 2018), they don't specifically pinpoint al-Ghazālī as the culprit. That charge comes from the works of ex-Muslim atheists. To see how persistently these views are regurgitated, consider the following citations from ex-Muslim atheists' writings. In 1995, Ibn Warraq (1995, 265), in *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, claimed that 'al-Ghazālī tells us that certain of the natural sciences are contrary to the law and religion, and . . . tells us to abstain from free thought and accept the conclusions of the Prophets'. In 2007, Taner Edis (2007, 36), in *An Illusion of Harmony: Science and Religion in Islam*, asserted that:

> Many defenders of reason in Islam argue that after al-Ghazālī rejuvenated Sunni orthodoxy, Muslim intellectual life became more rigid. The mainstream *ulama* [Muslim theologians] had always been cool toward the 'foreign sciences' such as philosophy and mathematics, and al-Ghazālī's condemnation of them carried the day.

In 2015, Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2015, 103–4), currently one of the leading voices of ex-Muslim atheism in the public sphere, mentioned how 'al-Ghazālī detested the ancient Greek philosophers. He regarded human reason as a cancer upon Islam.' His most famous work is *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, which attacks and refutes the claims of the ancients' in her most recent book, *Infidel*. So, over a span of 20 years (1995–2015), the narrative about and perception of al-Ghazālī hasn't really changed.

Collectively, these quotations indicate how al-Ghazālī is accused of being anti-philosophical and anti-scientific because such disciplines are deemed to be in conflict with Islam. While al-Ghazālī wrote several prominent works, the one I will focus on is *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut Al Falāsifah*; hereafter referred to as IP), already alluded to above by Ali. This book is of prime importance because it is designated as the source for al-Ghazālī's anti-philosophical and anti-scientific positions. I shall review the relevant sections of this book to demonstrate how this isn't the case. I shall also be reviewing certain selections from another work, his autobiography, *Deliverance from Error* (*Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*; hereafter referred to as DE), in which he clearly outlines his understanding of philosophy and the natural sciences to substantiate the claim being made in this chapter. Referring to DE is important for another reason. According to some early and modern orientalist thinkers, al-Ghazālī is considered to have dismissed philosophy and the natural sciences because of his 'spiritual turn' in later life (De Boer 1903, 168; MacDonald 1903, 238–40; Gutas 2018). Al-Ghazālī undeniably had a transformative experience in his lifetime, which eventually led him to write his magnum opus, *Revivification of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*; hereafter referred to as RRS), a well-known reference on Sufism (Ormsby 2007). DE plays an important role in our discussion in relation to this point. It was written during his mature spiritual phase in which he discusses his spiritual development. As will be shown shortly, DE clearly points out that al-Ghazālī still respected philosophy and the natural sciences while having had a spiritual turn.

To make the focus of this chapter clearer, I will not strictly be evaluating the decline thesis here, but I will mention a few relevant points. As mentioned before, this narrative is an old one that has its historical roots in mid-nineteenth-century orientalism (Iqbal 2007, 68–73; Haq 2009). Briefly put, the nucleation of the narrative started with the work of Ernst Renan, published in 1852, in which he juxtaposes al-Ghazālī with Ibn Rushd (1126–98), also known as Averroes in the western world, a Muslim philosopher who arrived on the intellectual scene shortly after the demise of al-Ghazālī. For Renan, Averroes represented the last philosopher or 'rationalist' in Muslim intellectual history, whereas al-Ghazālī was the defining representative of Islamic orthodoxy. This bifurcation is important for Renan because he believed that al-Ghazālī's thoughts were antithetical to the philosophical tradition (Griffel 2011, 14).[2]

[2] The main reason why this is asserted of al-Ghazālī is due to his occasionalist stance. In occasionalism there is no such thing as causal efficacy in created beings and everything is instead the manifestation of the will of God. This position is famously sourced from al-Ghazālī's seventeenth chapter of IP, where he discusses how things in of themselves are

Averroes' works were eventually translated and appreciated in Latin Europe in the medieval period, while Muslims hardly paid any interest to him. It is against this backdrop that Renan goes on to claim how it was a loss for the Muslim world to have abandoned Averroes, and therefore philosophy, and to have resumed with the thoughts of al-Ghazālī (Wild 1996). Later orientalists such as Tjitze J. de Boer (1866–1942) and Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921) went on to make similar claims (Iqbal 2007, 68–73; Griffel 2011). This eventually crystallized the decline thesis, which has since set the trend for making al-Ghazālī the 'go to' reference for Muslims' downfall in science and philosophy, and was propagated as a truthful account of Islamic history for the next century and a half. It is sufficient to mention that this account has been extensively undermined by recent scholarship coming out in the past few decades (Qadir 1988; Nasr and Leaman 1995; Ragep 2008; Griffel 2009; Haq 2009; Salibra 2011; Adamson 2016).[3]

My particular focus in this chapter is to look exclusively at what al-Ghazālī says in his own words to make his account as clear as possible, and to allay the misunderstandings and mischaracterizations that have been repeated about him.

Al-Ghazālī's Understanding of Philosophy

As a prerequisite for this discussion to take place, it is first necessary to unpack how al-Ghazālī himself understood philosophy. This is necessary to avoid any anachronistic readings. Consider how philosophy as understood today historically included the natural sciences within its domain. The division between the two disciplines is relatively recent (DeWitt 2010). So al-

causally inert. The example he uses is one of fire. God could cause cotton to burn but could equally cause it to not burn, depending on His will. God generally maintains regularity (*sunnatAllah*) in the causal nexus of the physical universe. However, on occasion He can disrupt that law to introduce miracles in the natural world. In this paradigm the causal link between the physical cause and effect is one of a weaker kind than logical necessity. This apparently puts science on very shaky grounds and was one of Averroes' criticisms of al-Ghazālī (Averroes 1954, 311–32; Sharif 1963, 555–9). Whether or not this is a valid criticism of al-Ghazālī is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, I recommend to the reader Griffel (2009, 153–6), who points out how science is theoretically possible in an occasionalist model. Furthermore, there is an academic debate on the interpretation of al-Ghazālī's occasionalism. Some academics have contested whether he really was an occasionalist. For the interested reader I recommend Griffel (2009, 179–82) and footnote 8 in Malik (2019) to avail themselves to the wider references which discuss this disagreement.

[3] To further qualify my point, it is not being denied that al-Ghazālī's views were never criticized. They were – see Ormbsy (1984) as an example. Rather, what is being argued here is that the specific contention of al-Ghazālī causing the decline of the Muslim world was a narrative developed under orientalism, and therefore a modern claim. One would be hard-pressed to find such a claim prior to the advent of orientalism in the writings of, say, Muslim thinkers.

Ghazālī's conception of philosophy must be first comprehended through his own understanding, otherwise we might falsely be imposing modern conceptions of philosophy on him. al-Ghazālī (1980, 63–70) clearly outlines this in his DE in which he divides philosophy into six branches:

1. *Mathematical sciences* – 'this is the study of arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy'.
2. *Logic* – 'the study of the methods of proofs, of syllogisms, of the conditions governing the premises of apodictic demonstration, of how these premises are to be combined, of the requisites for a sound definition, and of how the latter is to be drawn up'.
3. *Physical sciences* – This involves the 'study of the world of the heavens and their stars and of the sub-lunar world's simple bodies, such as water, air, earth, and fire, and composite bodies, such as animals, plants, and minerals'. It also involves the study of how things change when entities are transformed and mixed – that is, what we could call physics, chemistry, and biology in today's time.
4. *Metaphysical sciences* – While this could cover the same topics that come under the branch of metaphysics in contemporary philosophy, al-Ghazālī specifies that he particularly understands this as 'Aristotle's doctrine on these matters, as transmitted by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina [Avicenna], approximates the teachings of the Islamic philosophers'.
5. *Political sciences* – 'all that the philosophers have to say comes down to administrative maxims concerned with secular affairs and the government of rulers'.
6. *Moral sciences* – this simply 'comes down to listing the qualities and habits of the soul, and recording their generic and specific kinds, and the way to cultivate the good ones and combat the bad'.

For the purposes of this chapter, I shall only look at the mathematical sciences, physical sciences, and logic, as it is these particular disciplines that are relevant to the claims made by the aforementioned atheists. While we will have more to say on some of these later, for now let us return to IP to see exactly what its purpose was.

The Motivation of *Incoherence of the Philosophers*

As indicated by Ali, IP is a central reference for many individuals who want to triangulate the downfall of philosophy in the Muslim world. So let us see why al-Ghazālī wrote it.

First, it is important to point out how al-Ghazālī titled his book *Incoherence of the Philosophers* and not *Incoherence of Philosophy*. While this difference may seem like pedantry, it is an important observation because it indicates how it isn't the *subject* but the *philosophers* al-Ghazālī has an issue with (Griffel 2002, 43; Salibra 2011, 3). Who are these philosophers and why does he have a contention with them? This is the second point. al-Ghazālī very clearly establishes the purpose of IP in his introduction. His aim is to deconstruct the metaphysical narratives of the philosophers because when pressed for logical (apodictic) demonstration, they buckle: 'I took it upon myself to write this book in refutation of the ancient philosophers, to show the incoherence of their belief and the contradiction of their word in matters relating to *metaphysics*' (al-Ghazālī 2000, 3; my emphasis). The ideas that al-Ghazālī wanted to criticize were none other than Aristotle's, but since the leading commentators on Aristotle's works at the time were al-Farabi and Avicenna, he relied solely on their works, particularly Avicenna's, to make his case (al-Ghazālī 2000, 4). The very motivation of the IP was to provide a thorough-going critique of twenty metaphysical propositions which the philosophers (referring hereafter to al-Farabi and Avicenna) believed in, seventeen of which would be sufficient to lead them into *heterodoxy* and three of them to *heresy* in relation to Islamic tenets (al-Ghazālī 2000, 10–11). Examples include how the philosophers believed the world is eternal, how God cannot disrupt the laws of nature, how God does not know particulars, how they denied resurrection, etc. All twenty propositions, then, are strictly theological/metaphysical concerns which he evaluates in IP. In essence, then, IP is nothing but a systematic refutation of the narrative provided by the philosophers' metaphysical claims. He advances his own metaphysical narratives in a successive work called *Moderation of Belief* (*al-Iqtisad fil I'tiqad*; hereafter referred to as *Moderation*; al-Ghazālī 2012). So, while IP is deconstructive in nature, it doesn't imply that al-Ghazālī shunned or banished philosophy. Two observations can be made thus far. First, out of all the branches in philosophy, al-Ghazālī views *only* metaphysics to be problematic. Second, while al-Ghazālī may have issues with the philosophers' metaphysics, he doesn't reject their metaphysics as a whole, only twenty of their specific conclusions as he develops his own metaphysical framework in *Moderation*.[4]

[4] With these points in mind, one cannot but be surprised at a recent charge against al-Ghazālī by Gutas (2018), wherein he confusingly uses philosophy and science synonymously. As can be seen, al-Ghazālī makes it very clear that he has no objection to philosophy as a whole nor natural sciences, but only metaphysics.

Having clarified the purpose of IP, now let us see how al-Ghazālī viewed the sub-disciplines in philosophy.

The Mathematical Sciences

al-Ghazālī raises two concerns with the mathematical sciences. These aren't strictly concerns about the sciences themselves, but rather about how the people who approached them understood them. The first issue al-Ghazālī raises with the mathematical sciences is how individuals take the apodictic nature of mathematics and assume that everything else in philosophy follows through with the same epistemic standard – that is, with exact precision and clarity. So al-Ghazālī clarifies this and says (al-Ghazālī 1980, 65): 'What the ancients [i.e. philosophers] had to say about mathematical topics was apodictic, whereas their views on metaphysical questions were conjectural. But this is known only to an experienced man who has made a thorough study of the matter.' So the first concern that al-Ghazālī raises is linked to the false application of the demonstrative standards of mathematics across all other disciplines, particularly metaphysics, which, as stated above, he had issues with in regard to the philosophers. This can also be clearly evinced in the introduction of IP (al-Ghazālī 2000, 4):

> We have transmitted this story to let it be known that there is neither firm foundation nor perfection in the doctrine they [philosophers] hold; that they judge in terms of supposition and surmise, without verification or certainty; that they use the appearance of their mathematical and logical sciences as evidential proof for the truth of their metaphysical sciences . . . *Had their metaphysical sciences been as perfect in demonstration, free from conjecture, as their mathematical, they would not have disagreed among themselves regarding [the former], just as they have not disagreed in their mathematical sciences*. (my italics)

By contrast, the second concern that al-Ghazālī raises with regard to the mathematical sciences is about those individuals who believe that just because these sciences are associated with the philosophers, this particular field must be negated as well. To give this some context, it is well-known that there were intense intellectual differences between the Muslim philosophers and the Muslim theologians, where the latter viewed the works of the former with great apprehension as some of their tenets were problematic (Qadir 1988). It is against this background that al-Ghazālī (1980, 64) makes the following point:

> The second evil likely to follow from the study of the mathematical sciences derives from the case of an *ignorant friend of Islam* who supposes that our religion must be championed by the rejection of every science ascribed to the

> philosophers. So he rejects all their sciences, claiming that they display ignorance and folly in them all. He even denies their statements about eclipses of the sun and the moon and asserts that their views are contrary to the revealed Law. When such an assertion reaches the ears of someone who knows those things through apodictic demonstration, he does not doubt the validity of his proof, but rather believes that Islam is built on ignorance and the denial of apodictic demonstration. So he becomes all the more enamoured of philosophy and envenomed against Islam. *Great indeed is the crime against religion committed by anyone who supposes that Islam is to be championed by the denial of these mathematical sciences. For the revealed Law nowhere undertakes to deny or affirm these sciences, and the latter nowhere address themselves to religious matters*. (my italics)

So, and possibly to the dismay of the quoted atheists, al-Ghazālī actually defends the mathematical sciences against the *ignorant Muslims* or *friends of Muslims* who think they should be rejected. As per al-Ghazālī's understanding, the religious sciences consider these disciplines to be neutral and therefore unproblematic.

The Physical Sciences

al-Ghazālī was also unperturbed by the physical sciences. Like the previous quotations on mathematics, al-Ghazālī clearly says that there is nothing inherently wrong with the physical sciences (al-Ghazālī 1980, 66):

> The physical sciences are a study of the world of the heavens and their stars and of the sub-lunar world's simple bodies, such as water, air, earth, and fire, and composite bodies, such as animals, plants, and minerals. They also study the causes of their changing and being transformed and being mixed. That is like medicine's study of the human body and its principal and subsidiary organs and the causes of the alteration of the mixtures of its humours. *And just as religion does not require the repudiation of the science of medicine, so also it does not require the repudiation of the science of physics*. (my italics)

In his IP he even comments on how imposing a conflict between religion and the physical sciences can furnish the ground for atheists to refute Islam (al-Ghazālī 2000, 7):

> The greatest thing in which the atheists[5] rejoice is for the defender of religion to declare that these [astronomical demonstrations] and their like are

[5] This should be treated with caution. Most likely this means heretics. See my distinction between atheism and disbelief in Malik (2018, VII). al-Ghazālī could have in mind eternalists – that is, individuals who believed the universe was eternal, and materialists, both of whom he criticizes in his works.

> contrary to religion. Thus, the [atheist's] path for refuting religion becomes easy if the likes [of the above argument for defending religion] are rendered a condition [for its truth].

However, in one section of his RRS, al-Ghazālī (2015, 57) makes the claim that 'a portion of [it, i.e. the realm of the physical sciences] . . . contradicts the law and religion'. This is what Ibn Warraq was referring to in the quote cited earlier. This particular comment seems to be in apparent contradiction with the previous two quotations. To see why this isn't the case, let us unpack this statement carefully. First, al-Ghazālī mentions that only a *portion* of the physical sciences are problematic and not the entire discipline. Second, the portion deemed problematic was due to metaphysical and jurisprudential considerations that were not necessarily scientific. The specific sciences that al-Ghazālī thought were problematic were astrology (and not astronomy as we shall come to see) and alchemy, as they both had some relation to sorcery, which is why they were known as the occult sciences in medieval Islam (al-Ghazālī 2000, 161–3; Haq 2010; Melvin-Koushki 2017). These were jurisprudentially problematic because magic and sorcery are forbidden in Islam (al-Ghazālī 2015, 78). Furthermore, astrology was deemed to be problematic from a metaphysical angle because it could lead to people believing that celestial bodies are the *ultimate* causes of daily events (al-Ghazālī 2015, 80–1):

> it is detrimental for most people; for if they were taught that phenomenal events occur as results associated with the movement of the stars, it would occur to them that the stars were the ultimate cause [behind the events] and that they were divine entities dictating [worldly affairs] because they are sublime heavenly substances.

So, in this case, al-Ghazālī's concern was with respect to divine control. It is why al-Ghazālī constantly mentions that nothing in nature is independent of God as everything relies on Him for its maintenance, potency, and regularity (al-Ghazālī 1980, 66):

> The basic point regarding all of them is for you to know that nature is totally subject to God Most-High: it does not act of itself but is used as an instrument by its Creator. The sun, moon, stars, and the elements are subject to God's command: none of them effects any act by and of itself.

To be clear, al-Ghazālī isn't denying scientific causal explanations. In his worldview there is a distinction between the primary agent, which is God, and secondary agents – that is, everything other than God. What al-Ghazālī is

simply pointing out in this particular case is that astrology makes celestial bodies look like the primary agent when they are in fact secondary ones. But al-Ghazālī goes even further than this and argues that astrology is pure conjecture as it doesn't obtain any observations based on definitive knowledge (al-Ghazālī 2015, 81). It is in fact based on ignorance and therefore is a wasteful enterprise. On this point, he makes a comment in which he juxtaposes astrology with medicine and suggests how the latter is far superior to the former as a knowledge domain (al-Ghazālī 2015, 82):

> preoccupation [in the pursuit and practice of] astrology and that which resembles it is a hazardous undertaking and immersion in a sea of ignorance without any benefit whatsoever ... This is in contrast to the pursuit of medicine, for which there is a great need and [in medicine] the majority of proofs are based on what is observable.

So al-Ghazālī isn't denying astrology strictly and simply because of religious reasons. He also seems to have evaluated astrology epistemologically and concluded that it does not guarantee any certain kind of knowledge due to its speculative nature. So even if it was classified as a physical science, it would be bad science. Given this observation, and at the expense of *possible* anachronism, it wouldn't be a hermeneutic stretch to say that al-Ghazālī would have some interesting things to say on the infamous problem of demarcation in philosophy of science as discussed today (Ladyman 2002). In another work of his known as *Jewels of the Quran*, al-Ghazālī (2013) identifies correlations between the works of God – that is, the natural world – and the Quran. He pinpoints particular verses related to natural phenomena and mentions alongside them the experts who are capable of understanding what they could mean in scientific detail. Consider the following Quranic verse (26:80): 'And when I am ill, it is He who cures me.' al-Ghazālī (2013, 30) comments on it and says: 'This single work can only be known by him who knows the science of medicine completely, for this science means nothing but the knowledge of all aspects of diseases with their symptoms, and the knowledge of their cures and means.' Another verse makes a reference to the precision of celestial bodies: 'The sun and the moon [move] by precise calculation' (Quran 55:5). On this and other verses pertaining to their movement, al-Ghazālī (2013, 31) makes the following remark: 'The real meaning of the movement of the sun and the moon according to a fixed reckoning ... can only be known by him who knows the manner of the composition of the heavens and the earth, and this itself is a science [i.e. astronomy].' So even the Quran, the apex of the Islamic worldview, wasn't deemed to be in contradiction with physical

sciences and in fact al-Ghazālī seemed to have believed that they display a kind of correlational (and thus not definitive[6]) synchronicity (Tamer 2015). More importantly, these quotations clearly suggest that al-Ghazālī recognized the authority of people who are experts in these areas of science.

Finally, and this may be the most surprising claim to some critics of al-Ghazālī, he actually believed that these sciences were *obligatory* to study and implement by Muslim communities. To give some context, in Islam there is a division between individual religious obligations and communal ones. Examples of the former include things like praying to God five times a day, giving alms annually, fasting during Ramadan, and others. The latter includes activities that are needed to sustain a healthy and thriving community without which society might end up in chaos. The absence of either is considered a sin in Islam, but for communal obligations, as long as there is a sufficient number of people performing them then the obligation on the whole community is met. But if no one or an insufficient number is performing them then the entire Muslim community is sinful. Let me quote al-Ghazālī at length to illustrate what he says about this point in relation to the physical sciences (al-Ghazālī 2015, 38):

> Communal obligations include every form of knowledge that is indispensable to the establishment of the affairs of this world, [and include disciplines] such as medicine, which is necessary for the preservation of healthy bodies, and mathematics, which is necessary for financial transactions and the division of wealth in which wills and inheritance and other needs are involved. Should a region be without someone who practices these disciplines, the people of that region will fall into straightened circumstances; but should there be [at least] one individual established [in that discipline], it would suffice and the obligatory nature of [having someone knowledgeable in that discipline] would be lifted from the remainder of the community.

So, far from negating or shunning the physical sciences, al-Ghazālī seems to be very clear in stating that they are permissible and even necessary for Muslims.[7] If anything, al-Ghazālī seemed to have provided a critical filter for evaluating such sciences. So long as people don't confuse the proximate

[6] In other words, al-Ghazālī is simply pointing out that the Quran isn't strictly a book of science but nor is it anti-scientific. There is a general resonance between scripture and creation.

[7] The reader may be interested to know that al-Ghazālī based this obligation on his conception of an Islamic polity. For believers to attain spiritual ascension it is necessary to have a functioning society, else it becomes incredibly difficult. This isn't to say that this can't be done in isolation – al-Ghazālī is simply asserting the need and appreciation of pragmatic societal functioning which makes it easier for believers as a collective to attend to their spiritual development (al-Ghazālī 2015; Campanini 2019, 17–42).

scientific explanations for the ultimate ones, and people are aware of the jurisprudentially forbidden territories like sorcery, the physical sciences were completely permissible to study, according to al-Ghazālī.

Logic

al-Ghazālī (1980, 65) saw logic as a conceptual tool that is religiously neutral: 'Nothing in the logical sciences has anything to do with religion by way of negation and affirmation.' To understand why al-Ghazālī says this, it is important to point out that prior to al-Ghazālī, logic wasn't really taught formally or known by theologians, and they generally viewed anything to do with philosophy with suspicion, as mentioned earlier. Hence, logic wasn't really taken up by them (Ahmad 1981). So, to make it clear to theologians (and Muslims broadly), al-Ghazālī points out how Muslim theologians use logic in their discourse, while possibly not acknowledging its formal rules, which is why the philosophers who did acknowledge them were better elucidating their positions. He even gives an introductory example of a syllogism to make this point (al-Ghazālī 1980, 65):

> it [logic] is the sort of thing mentioned by the *mutakallimun* [Muslim scholastics] and the partisans of reasoning in connection with the proofs they use. The philosophers differ from them only in modes of expression and technical terms and in a greater refinement in definitions and subdivisions. Their manner of discoursing on such things is exemplified by their saying: 'If it is certain that every A is B, then it necessarily follows that some B is A' – for instance: If it is certain that every man is an animal, then it follows necessarily that some animal is a man. This they express by saying that a universal affirmative proposition is convertible to a particular affirmative proposition.

al-Ghazālī clarifies this in the introduction to his IP as well, where he explains that logic is not a subject that is monopolized by the philosophers: 'Yes, when they [philosophers] say that the logical sciences must be mastered, *this is true*. *But logic is not confined to them* . . . But when the one seeking to be clever, who is weak, hears the name "logic," he thinks it an unfamiliar art, unknown to the theologians, known only to the philosophers' (my italics). In this quotation it is important to point out that al-Ghazālī clearly agrees with the philosophers that the logical sciences must be mastered. This is an explicit text indicating how al-Ghazālī himself understood the various components of philosophy and tried to make them clearer to appreciate and comprehend them (in terms of benefits and harms) for Muslim audiences from his own theological perspective.

Finally, and again maybe to the surprise of the atheists cited earlier, al-Ghazālī actually wrote several books on logic that paved the way for it to become firmly ingrained in Muslim seminary studies. These include *The Criterion of Knowledge in the Art of Logic* (*Mi'yar al-'Ilm fi fan al-Mantiq*), *The Touchstone of Thinking in Logic* (*Mihākk al-Nazar fi'l-Mantiq*), *The Just Balance* (*Al-Qistās al-Mustaqim*), and one of his greatest works on jurisprudence, *The Best in the Principles of Jurisprudence* (*Al-Mustasfā min 'Ilm al-Usūl*) (Ahmad 1981, 28). Ahmad (1981, 56–7) makes a noteworthy observation regarding these works and the surrounding situation at the time:

> al-Ghazālī was aware of the fact that in order to be able to convince the scholar-jurists of the utility of logic and to accept it in their curriculum, he should address them in language that they could understand if it was not possible to use their own language. So when al-Ghazālī compiled his works on logic, he did not use the logicians' style and terminology, he used a style with which the scholar-jurists were familiar and for which they had no distaste. He exchanged the logicians' terminology for a new one without changing their concepts . . . Thus his books on logic . . . were widespread in contrast to those of the philosophers, although their books came fairly close to Aristotle's logic and were technically more correct.

So instead of rejecting logic or reason, al-Ghazālī actually systematized, formalized, and repackaged the study of logic for the world of Muslim theologians by eliminating the negative apprehensions they had because of its associations with philosophy at the time. Thus, al-Ghazālī was far from understanding human reason as 'cancerous', as suggested by Ali.

Conclusion

Some atheists claim that al-Ghazālī was against philosophy and the natural sciences. From the brief review of his works covered in this chapter, it seems that such claims are far from the truth. Clearly, al-Ghazālī only had issues with metaphysics and even then only with twenty metaphysical doctrines of the philosophers rather than with the entire field of metaphysics. Furthermore, al-Ghazālī rejected neither the natural sciences nor logic. In fact, as we saw in his own words, al-Ghazālī promoted their use, which eventually helped improve their understanding in the Muslim world.[8] It seems very unlikely, then, that the aforementioned atheists have read

[8] It has been suggested that al-Ghazali's metaphysics would also not have a problem with developments in modern science. On this point see Campanini (2019, 82–135) and Malik (2019).

al-Ghazālī's works charitably. What's worse is that even if al-Ghazālī's primary works were read uncharitably, they have neglected the vast amount of scholarship that has gone into al-Ghazālī in the past fifty years (Fakhry 1958; Sharif 1963; Qadir 1988; Frank 1992; 1994; al-Akiti 2009; Griffel 2009) which elucidate his highly developed worldview, making their reading all the more problematic and unrepresentative.

While the claims we've looked at clearly illustrate how poorly some atheists have understood al-Ghazālī, this narrative is so predominant that it can also be found in other circles. Not the least surprising are works written by aggressive critics of Islam. Consider Reilly (2011), who published a whole book on this topic with the provocative title, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*! Other groups include famous scientists and science popularizers. For instance, the eminent physicist Steven Weinberg (2008), also an atheist, who, when reviewing Dawkins' infamous book, *The God Delusion*,[9] pointed out that al-Ghazālī rejected science and how the Muslim world went through a decline. Another very well-known science popularizer, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, a self-acclaimed agnostic, claimed in two distinctive lectures that al-Ghazālī was the source of the decline. In one lecture he explicitly asserts that al-Ghazālī thought 'the manipulation of numbers is the work of the devil' (YouTube 2013), and in another that 'mathematics is the work of the devil' (YouTube 2012). One can see sporadic responses to such claims in the wider literature. For example, Jamil Ragep (2008), an expert in Islamic intellectual history, retorted to Weinberg's assertions and pointed out how he misunderstood al-Ghazālī and seems to be unaware of the vast literature that undermines his claims on Islamic scientific history. He gives several examples of scientific developments in the post-Ghazālīan stage, including astronomy and biology (Ragep 2008, 2). Joseph Lumbard, a specialist in Quranic studies and one of the editors of the seminal *The Study Quran* (Nasr et al., 2015), recently published a video detailing how Tyson errs in his narrative, which includes discussing what al-Ghazālī actually said about mathematics, the context of his worldview, and the intense philosophical debates that carried on even after the demise of al-Ghazālī (YouTube 2017). So there are experts who have at times had rejoinders against individuals who assert the standard oriental narrative

[9] There have been some claims that Dawkins also points to al-Ghazālī for the decline of the Muslim world (Economist 2015). While Dawkins may not be the most diligent researcher in the religions he criticizes, on this point it seems that Dawkins' name must be cleared. As far as the author is aware, Dawkins doesn't make this claim anywhere and it seems to be due to the false association of Weinberg's review of his book.

(see also Dallal 2010; Altaie 2015). Surprisingly, however, this account has been propounded by Muslims, too, either implicitly or explicitly (Rahman 1984; Hoodbhoy 1991; Deen 2007; Naqvi 2015). If anything, these references indicate how far and deeply entrenched this myth has become. It seems that such authors have either ended up relying on secondary sources without having gone through the primary works of al-Ghazālī himself, or have read his works but only very selectively. While this myth will not likely die anytime soon, this contribution hopefully helps towards clarifying the misconceptions surrounding al-Ghazālī's relationship with science and philosophy.

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17

Lives of Jesus and Historico-critical Skepticism

JEFFREY L. MORROW

Historical critical biblical scholarship, particularly as it pertained to the study of the historical Jesus and the many "lives" of Jesus that were published and that popularized this scholarship, contributed to the broader skeptical culture of the radical Enlightenment. Although in this chapter I will refer to the radical more skeptical Enlightenment as "Enlightenment," in reality we could speak more accurately of several "Enlightenments," including Catholic, Jewish, and other religious Enlightenments that all occurred from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries (Brown 1990, 286; Hess 1999; Sorkin 2008; Lehner 2010, 166–78; 2016). The more radical form of the Enlightenment was marked by its skepticism, and this skepticism spread outside of academic circles to a more popular audience, not least by way of the popularizations of more skeptical biblical scholarship in works like David Friedrich Strauss' famous 1835 *Life of Jesus*.

What remains under-recognized by scholars is that the history of such historical critical biblical scholarship goes all the way back to antiquity. Challenging the traditional accounts of the Scriptures began very early as an attempt to dismantle Jewish and Christian truth claims by undermining their Scriptures. In the medieval period, as Jewish and Christian exegetes responded to these earlier criticisms, and examined the textual traditions of their Scriptures, they began to study the biblical manuscripts, their transmission and translation, as well as the biblical stories themselves, from a more historical perspective that was less directly concerned with theology than prior exegesis had been. This less-theological approach to Scripture became the main way of studying the Bible for some humanist scholars during the Renaissance. From the Renaissance through the Reformation, exegetes began to transform the way in which the Bible was interpreted. It was in the early modern period, and particularly in the seventeenth century, that these humanistic philological skills were combined with a newly emerging

skepticism, a sort of renaissance of ancient skepticism, and this began to create a merely secular method for interpreting the Bible apart from any theological task. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this historical critical project led to a broader skepticism of the Bible through creating distrust, both of the texts within the Bible and also of the traditions of biblical interpretation.

Early Pre-history of Historical Critical Studies

Historical Jesus studies shares a common origin with the historical critical method of biblical interpretation, also referred to as historical biblical criticism; both develop at the same time, and in some ways, historical Jesus studies emerges from within the tangled history of historical biblical criticism, as a form of that method. Historical biblical criticism itself has an important pre-history that is seldom examined, reaching back into late antiquity (Hahn and Wiker 2013; Morrow 2016; 2019c). The first stage in this development came from the contributions of early anti-Jewish and anti-Christian polemics, mainly from Gnostic sources and Roman intellectuals, but later from the medieval Muslim world. During this lengthy period of time and extending into the Renaissance, Jewish and Christian intellectuals developed humanistic tools in order to better understand the past and to better understand their sacred texts. As these tools developed, and as some of the more skeptical arguments from past polemics entered the Christian world, new philosophies began to develop in the early modern period that would condition the reception, both of the polemical arguments and the philological and textual critical skills. It was in the seventeenth century that these various historical trends came together and began to create the foundations of what would become modern historical biblical criticism, of which the eighteenth and nineteenth century "lives of Jesus" and historical Jesus scholarship formed a part.

The Early Anti-Jewish and Anti-Christian Polemical Context

In the earliest years of critiquing the Bible, the exegesis was primarily skeptical, polemical, and of varying degrees of erudition. Some such criticism emerged from Gnostic writers or from other liminal communities in dialogue with Jews and Christians (Grant 1945, 186–87; Yamauchi 1970, 60; Young 1989, 109–12). Such early intellectuals attempted to show why traditional Jewish

and Christian views were false. These figures actively engaged in polemics, focusing on passages from the Bible that were either difficult to explain or appeared inconsistent.

Two of the earliest and most significant of these intellectuals engaging in a critique of the Bible were the Roman philosopher Porphyry (*c.* 233 to *c.* 305), who wrote primarily in the third century (Wilken 1984, 137, 143; Droge 1989, 178; Kofsky 2000, 30), and the second-century Greek philosopher Celsus (Grant 1945, 186; Young 1989, 113). It was really with the advent of Islam and medieval Muslim examination of the Pentateuch and of the Gospels that a more thorough philological critique of the Bible began to develop, albeit such criticism was almost entirely polemical (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992). One important but too often neglected figure in this history is the skeptical author, who may have been Jewish or Gnostic, Hiwi al-Balkhi, writing in the mid-ninth century. He relied upon all of the polemical work that came before: Celsus and Porphyry, but also Marcion (*c.* 85 to *c.* 160) and Julian the Apostate (*c.* 330–363). Hiwi challenged the inspiration of Scripture, going further than any prior critic in undermining the veracity of miracles and underscoring inconsistencies in the biblical texts. Most of our information on Hiwi comes from the medieval Jewish sage Saadia Gaon's published refutation of Hiwi's work (Davidson 1915, 11–37; Rosenthal 1949).

Arguably the most significant figure from the medieval Muslim world is Ibn Hazm of Andalusia (994–1064), a polymath who exerted much effort in attacking the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, but who did so with a high level of philological and philosophical erudition. Ibn Hazm's prolific work encompassed philosophy, law, history, Judaism, Christianity, Quranic exegesis, and poetry, among other areas. For our present discussion, Ibn Hazm was most important in developing a critique of Jewish and Christian Scriptures based not merely on philosophical or theological arguments, which he also included, but also on an analysis of the texts. He must have had access to Arabic translations of the Bible, and he scoured the Scriptures for inconsistencies. Ibn Hazm did not construct a method of interpretation; such a desire for "method" in biblical studies, as elsewhere, would await the early modern period. Nevertheless, many of Ibn Hazm's criticisms, most noticeably of the Pentateuch, would feature prominently in the work of later intellectuals like Spinoza when they began to formulate methods for interpretation, even though they would not cite Ibn Hazm (Asín Palacios 1927–32; Rif'at 1988; Berman 2019, 377–90). Ibn Hazm's work spread throughout the medieval world in a variety of ways, but most likely through the Jewish sage Abraham Ibn Ezra's reception of Ibn Hazm (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992, 72–74, 139–40).

What these skeptical and polemical works did was supply many of the arguments that later intellectuals would use in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, as they both mounted challenges to the veracity of the biblical texts and developed modern methods of historical critical exegesis. By carefully scouring Scripture for internal evidence against the truth of the Bible and against Judaism and Christianity, these thinkers provided ammunition for later Enlightenment critique. Many of the arguments Enlightenment thinkers and exegetes employed critiquing Scripture, especially in the seventeenth century, were not new, but rather originated with these earlier polemicists, mediated to them in various ways.

Medieval Christian Bridge between Polemical Literature and Later Philological Methods

It was really later in the medieval period that doubts about the authenticity of biblical material began to enter the Christian world; such doubts moved beyond the sort of textual critical questions of exegetes like Origen (*c.* 188 to *c.* 253). In some ways, Peter Abelard (1079–1142) prepared the ground for such studies with his dialectical method of sifting through authentic and inauthentic sayings from the Church fathers in his *Sic et Non*, and his correspondence with Heloise (*c.* 1090 or 1100–64) shows evidence of doubts about traditional positions on Scripture, including authorship and composition. As with many who came before him, Abelard showed a marked preference for the literal sense over allegorical exegesis, and was influenced by medieval Muslim thought, likely by way of Peter the Venerable (*c.* 1092–1156), who had taken an immense interest in all things Muslim (Arnaldez 1956, 319; Mews 2007, 83–108; Mews and Perry 2011, 3–19).

A number of important developments occurred as the medieval period transitioned to early modernity. The work of William of Ockham (*c.* 1287–1347) began to place an emphasis on the role of biblical specialists as an authority above that of the Catholic Church's Magisterium. Ockham's context was the theological and political debates between Pope John XXII (1244–1334) and Ludwig of Bavaria (1282–1347), where Marsilius of Padua (*c.* 1275 to *c.* 1342) likely aided Ockham as the two were under Ludwig's protection. It is possible that the work of the medieval Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd, more commonly known as Averroes (1126–98), or at least the reception of Ibn Rushd's thought in the Latin west, exerted some influence on Marsilius and thus Ockham (Minnis 2003, 292–308; Hahn and Wiker 2013, 44–7). Another important yet neglected figure within this history is Niccolò Machiavelli

(1469–1527), whose works would influence seventeenth- and eighteenth-century exegetes who relied upon his hermeneutic of suspicion, as it would later be called. Machiavelli situated the biblical figure of Moses, whose motives he reduced to merely political, within a broader historical narrative removed from any distinctly Jewish or Christian framework. This was the sort of critical history that would later be identified as secular. Machiavelli's thought would exert a great influence on later thinkers within the history of historical critical exegesis (Lynch 2008, 29–55; Hammill 2012, 31–66; Hahn and Wiker 2013, 117–46).

What these late medieval thinkers did was to build upon the traditions that preceded them, but also mediated some of the more skeptical intellectual currents from before, to those that would come after. As they developed into the Renaissance, with thinkers like Machiavelli, they prepared the way for a skeptical reception of the philological tools that were then being developed and honed, especially in textual criticism. These developments would continue as the Protestant Reformation erupted throughout Europe. With the Renaissance focus *ad fontes*, a return back to the sources, and the Reformation emphasis on what would come to be known as *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone as an authority, the ground would be laid for the Enlightenment critique of tradition, and the development of a new secular form of biblical interpretation, allegedly objective historical enquiry.

Contribution from the Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation was a complicated upheaval that affected all of Europe, including its most northern, southern, and eastern realms (MacCulloch 2005). The political dimensions of the Reformation are increasingly recognized (Scribner and Dixon 2003, 35; Frampton 2006, 13), but too little attention has been paid to the ways in which support for and opposition to the papacy through and after the Reformation was tied to the prior ability to limit papal authority within a given realm. Thus, those regions that already had diplomatic concordat agreements limiting papal authority within their realm remained Catholic through the Reformation; conversely, the Protestant Reformation was successful exclusively in realms that lacked such means of limiting the pope's authority prior to the Reformation (Cavanaugh 1995, 400–1).

It is not the case that there were no political concerns in earlier theological movements or matters – there certainly were. In the medieval period, however, society itself was sacramental, and so the Church leaders and

temporal rulers worked in the sacred and temporal realms – both realms of which involved politics as well as spiritual concerns – for shared goals ensuring temporal peace and eternal beatitude (Jones 2017; Morrow 2019d, 26–7). The politics of the Reformation period eroded this sacramental society, and the violent conflagrations that ripped apart Europe, misnamed "wars of religion," found Catholics fighting Catholics, with Protestants teamed up on both sides, as temporal rulers tried to stake their claims on sovereignty in what remained after the feudal period's demise (Cavanaugh 2009, 123–80; Morrow 2019d, 26–31). This history sets an important context for understanding the Reformation's contributions to modern historical biblical criticism.

The contributions of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and of the Protestant Reformation in Germany are sometimes focused on to the exclusion of other figures and regions, and yet, these contributions were fundamental in shaping the Reformation and the biblical exegesis that followed. Luther set up a dialectic between Law and Gospel that ushered in a host of dichotomies. In some ways Luther's dialectical method replaced the medieval fourfold sense of Scripture. Moreover, with his canon within the canon, wherein Luther understood certain books of Scripture to be more inspired than others, he initiated a trend to search for what was to be understood as authentic portions of the Bible (Hahn and Wiker 2013, 147–219; Gregory 2017, 23–6, 87–136, 146–59). Although it is often remarked that the main contribution of the Protestant Reformers to the history of biblical exegesis is their reduction of the fourfold sense of Scripture to the literal sense alone, this is not completely accurate. On the one hand, many of the exegetical moves these Protestants were making had already been done prior, and on the other hand, Protestant exegesis, from Luther and Calvin to Jonathan Edwards, so often incorporated the forms of exegesis that prior had been identified as typological and tropological (or moral), sometimes including either or both under the notion of "literal" (Muller 1996, 68–82; Klepper 2016, 418–38).

When the Protestant Reformation arrived in England, King Henry VIII's regime created a new fertile environment for modern biblical criticism to grow. The English Reformation not only relied upon intellectual currents from the Germanic regions, but also upon the prior work of John Wycliffe (*c.* 1330–84) and also of Machiavelli, thus bringing together in one place several intellectual streams that would be essential for later modern biblical criticism (Hahn and Wiker 2013, 61–115, 221–55). The Reformation in England was not an event that only affected biblical exegesis in the English-speaking world, but rather would come to influence modern biblical criticism more broadly,

primarily by its influence on German biblical scholarship. Scholars of the history of modern biblical scholarship often correctly note how German biblical scholarship began to influence and determine the path of much of English and American biblical scholarship at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and even to the present time (Rogerson 1984). What scholars too often fail to recognize is the ways in which eighteenth-century biblical criticism in Germany was indebted to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Deistic biblical criticism in England (Reventlow 1980; Legaspi 2010, 105–28).

Renaissance Humanism and Early Modern Critique

Already prior to the Reformation the Renaissance time period began to develop philological tools that witnessed important developments in textual criticism, including the tradition of polyglot Bibles where various textual traditions, mainly different language editions, of the biblical texts were placed alongside one another to facilitate textual scholarship (Linde 2011; Carbajosa 2014, 15–42; van Miert 2018, 1–21). Such humanist concerns were rooted in the medieval period, but these developments continued through the Reformation and early modernity. Textual criticism of both the Old Testament and the New Testament became one of the most vibrant areas of research through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Epp 2016, 110–37; Mandelbrote 2016, 82–109).

In this context, the seventeenth century became a pivotal century within the history of modern biblical scholarship (Hardy 2017; Nellen and Steenbakkers 2017, 16–57). Not only did biblical philologists, primarily in the first half of the century, synthesize the textual critical and philological methods that had come before, but they also took this humanist criticism further. In this context we can point to the importance of Joseph Scaliger (1540–1609) and his intellectual heirs (Grafton 1983; 1993; Hardy 2017, 183–93; van Miert 2018, 22–52). Even though Scaliger primarily worked at the end of the sixteenth century, he lived on into the seventeenth, and his students would dominate biblical philological debates in the first half the seventeenth century.

Beyond these paramount developments in humanist criticism in the first half of the seventeenth century, another important contribution of that century was the shift to a more skeptical critique, wherein exegetes and political philosophers like Isaac La Peyrère (*c.* 1596–1676), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), and Richard Simon (1638–1712)

helped shape the future of modern biblical criticism with their exegetical works (Bernier 2010; Gibert 2010, 131–49; Hardy 2017, 373–402; Morrow 2016, 54–138).

In this context, La Peyrère emerges as an important and yet relatively unknown figure. La Peyrère was not a biblical scholar working at a university. La Peyrère was rather part of the patronage system in which a wealthy patron – in his case the former Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–89), the patroness of Descartes (1596–1650) – funded their work. La Peyrère's work was important not so much for his scholarly contribution as much as the influence of his work. His most pertinent book was his *Prae-Adamitae*, which was initially circulated in unpublished form and received published refutations, including by Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), before La Peyrère officially published it. Doubtless his fame spread in part because of Christina's patronage, on account of La Peyrère's important position as the secretary for the Prince of Condé, as well as because of La Peyrère's place within an important social network of intellectuals in Paris within the broader seventeenth-century Republic of Letters. What perhaps was most significant about La Peyrère's engagement with Scripture was his reception and redeployment of the more skeptical strands of prior biblical exegesis, as pertaining to the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch for example, coupled with the way in which his biblical political project, supporting the king of France, paved the way for a methodology built on skepticism of traditional interpretations (Quennehen 2000, 243–55; Popkin 2001, 74–84; Pietsch 2012; Morrow 2016, 54–84).

Also of importance was Hobbes, the English political theorist, who was a contemporary of La Peyrère's, and perhaps knew him while in self-imposed exile in Paris during the English Civil War, when he spent time at the Prince of Condé's residence. For the history of biblical scholarship, Hobbes' most important work was his 1651 *Leviathan*, roughly half of which dealt with biblical interpretation, and, although it was published before La Peyrère's work, was actually completed after La Peyrère's, since the latter's was circulated in complete form before Hobbes had finished writing. Like La Peyrère, Hobbes too showed he was an heir to the more skeptical tradition that preceded medieval exegesis, and also that he could redeploy Scripture, as was increasingly becoming the case in the early modern period, for political purposes (Pacchi 1988, 231–39; Malcolm 2002, 383–431; Morrow 2016, 85–103).

These last two figures, and others like Spinoza and Simon, are especially important because of the ways in which they brought together the more skeptical traditions from late antiquity. La Peyrère and Hobbes built upon

some of the textual and exegetical conclusions which emerged from humanist criticism, but they also incorporated the more skeptical challenges to the Bible that had preceded them. Others among their contemporaries, like Spinoza and Simon, would do similar work, but, being more skilled in biblical philology, languages, and textual criticism, were able to better make their own significant contributions to the field of biblical criticism by way of method. It was during this time in the seventeenth century that a renewed interest in earlier skepticism underwent a sort of renaissance, leading to the more radical Enlightenment (Israel 2001; 2006; Wiker 2002; Popkin 2003).

Early Modern Groundwork for Historical Jesus Studies

Two important figures from this more skeptical latter half of the seventeenth century for historical criticism, including later studies of the historical Jesus, are Spinoza and Simon. Spinoza is of towering importance primarily because of his proposal for a robust historical method in biblical studies. Spinoza was in a unique position in the seventeenth century. Raised in a Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam, he was formally kicked out of the community, but he never became a Christian, despite his intimate association with Christians on the radical fringe of Dutch Protestant traditions. Spinoza became a leading intellectual in the more skeptical philosophical circles in the Dutch Republic of the latter half of the seventeenth century. Most important in this context was his anonymous publication of his great 1670 work *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, which dealt primarily with biblical interpretation even as it pertained to his political philosophy. He was clearly influenced by Machiavelli and Hobbes, among others, and yet he combined the more philosophical skeptical approach of Descartes with the historical method of Francis Bacon (1561–1626). In the seventh chapter of his *Tractatus*, Spinoza laid out the blueprint of his methodological approach, which he hoped would give biblical exegesis a scientific footing. Throughout his *Tractatus*, Spinoza attempted to do the sort of exegetical work he proposed, wherein he showed himself an astute disciple of Machiavelli, using his exegesis to bolster his political program. Spinoza's works were so virulently condemned that his arguments set the major debates of the more radical Enlightenment, and biblical scholars working at the universities built their methods upon his proposed outline, thus ensuring that biblical studies would be indebted to Spinoza for as long as historical criticism exists in its present

form (Frampton 2006; Morrow 2016, 104–38; Grafton 2017, 177–96; Fukuoka 2018, 218–45).

Simon followed Spinoza very carefully, even as he argued that his work was an antidote to Spinoza's. Simon was a more careful and more highly skilled biblical philologist and textual critic than was Spinoza, and thus Simon was able to better multiply the problems Spinoza identified in the Scriptures. Simon, who had befriended La Peyrère, claimed that his point in multiplying the difficulties in the Bible was to show the necessity of the infallible tradition of the Catholic Church, without which, so he argued, all that would remain of the Bible was a collection of contradictions and errors, far worse than Spinoza even hinted at. The tradition Simon appealed to appeared remarkably arbitrary, and thus the sincerity of his apologetic is unclear. Both Spinoza and Simon recycled a host of challenges to Scripture culled from the more skeptical repertoire from earlier Gnostic and Muslim critics, just as had La Peyrère and Hobbes before them, and yet both Spinoza and Simon wielded these criticisms more deftly than their other contemporaries. The ways in which John Locke (1632–1704) and others received Simon's works in England (Locke had two annotated copies of Simon's *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*), coupled with his translation into English, ensured that his influence would spread to the English-speaking world. The same is true about his spread in the German-speaking world, facilitated by his translation into German and his reception by Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91). Simon's works were condemned in France, but his method lived on in Germany and England in the eighteenth century (Auvray 1968, 201–14; Mirri 1972; Woodbridge 1988, 65–87; Müller 2004; Morrow 2017, 36–41).

Beginnings of Historical Jesus Research and the Lives of Jesus

In some ways the appropriation of the seventeenth-century biblical criticism, of Simon's work and Spinoza's method, as well as of Hobbes and others, among English Deists was decisive for shaping the future of historical critical scholarship in general and of historical Jesus scholarship in particular. This can best be seen by the work of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), who devoured English Deistic literature, including Deistic works on biblical exegesis. The German Reimarus read everything he could get his hands on from the English Deists. He received his biblical philological training at the University of Jena, but also studied classical philology. His doctoral degree was in philosophy, and, tellingly, he wrote on Machiavelli. His love of English

Deistic works was likely derived from his time in England, where he was exposed to their intellectual output. His professional career was as a philology professor, with Hebrew being one of his primary subjects. His main import for the history of biblical criticism was the role he played in the earliest years of historical Jesus studies via Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), who published Reimarus' works after Reimarus had died (Brown 1985, 1–16, 29–33, 50–55; Reventlow 2001, 157–66; Hahn and Morrow 2020).

Spinoza's philosophy was one of the most important influences on Lessing's thought and the so-called Jewish Enlightenment was mediated to Lessing via his friendship with Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86). Although Lessing wrote his own works on the Bible, his importance was primarily through his publication of Reimarus' earlier works in what are known as the Wolfenbüttel Fragments. Although Reimarus had published a number of works under his name, what Lessing discovered and published of Reimarus' had been the latter's more private and more skeptical works pertaining to the Bible. Reimarus' posthumous works included thorough critiques of both Old and New Testaments, and it is clear where the more skeptical influences from the past, and Spinoza and Machiavelli in particular, affected his thought. In terms of New Testament scholarship in general, and the question of the historical Jesus specifically, Reimarus challenged the way the New Testament applied Old Testament prophecies to Jesus, arguing that many of them had nothing at all to do with Jesus. Most radical of all, Reimarus denied Jesus' resurrection from the dead. As with later Form Criticism, Reimarus distinguished what happened in history from the way in which these accounts were retold according to the theological and related concerns of the evangelists. In Spinoza's *Tractatus*, Jesus emerged as a moral teacher, much as the Bible was reduced to a basic ethical behavior, namely love of neighbor. Similarly, for Reimarus, Jesus was little more than a moral teacher; Reimarus denied miracles much as had Spinoza and Machiavelli before him (O'Neill 1991, 13–27; Baird 1992, 165–77; Bultmann 2012, 66–86; Hahn and Morrow 2020).

David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74) was one of the next most important figures in the development of historical critical approaches to the life of Jesus. Among Strauss' many influential teachers was the great Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), who had created an entire historical approach to New Testament studies and early Church history at the University of Tübingen (Baird 1992, 269; Ong 2016, 119; Hahn and Morrow 2020). Strauss studied both Hegel (1770–1831) and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). He later learned directly from Schleiermacher while studying in Berlin. Although often left

unmentioned, it was at Berlin that Strauss studied under the important biblical critic Wilhelm Vatke (1806–82). It was while a student of Vatke that Strauss derived his material and motive for writing his famous *Life of Jesus*, which he published in 1835. Only a few works prior to Strauss' *Life of Jesus* did as much to undermine the authority of the Bible outside of intellectual circles. Much like Reimarus, about whom Strauss later wrote a biography, and Spinoza before him, Strauss set out to remove the miraculous from the biblical accounts of Jesus' life. He was able to insinuate as much by asking about legendary elements in the four canonical Gospels. Something similar had already been done in Old Testament studies – for example, at the hands of Wilhelm de Wette (1780–1849) – but Strauss popularized this notion for the study of the New Testament with his widely read *Life of Jesus*. He was also able to cast doubt on the historical trustworthiness of the Gospel of John. Prior to Strauss' work, biblical exegetes had assumed that the Gospel of John was as, or more, historically trustworthy than the Synoptic Gospels, but after Strauss, the pendulum swung in the other direction, that the Synoptics presented a more historical portrait of Jesus than John (Brown 1985, 183–204; Baird 1992, 246–58; Reventlow 2001, 240–56; Fabisiak 2015; Hahn and Morrow 2020).

Strauss was strongly influenced by his deep reading of the so-called Mythical School of Old Testament studies (e.g., de Wette but also Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827) and Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826)). He then applied the methods of this school on the New Testament portraits of Jesus. The approach of the Mythical School was to treat the stories of Scripture as portraits of what the primitive communities would have understood within their mythic culture; it would not be historical in the modern sense, but would have been history adapted by their mythological understanding of reality (Hartlich and Sachs 1952, 11–21; Oergel 1998, 12–30; Williamson 2004, 151; Hahn and Morrow 2020). Strauss' later work was overshadowed by Ludwig Feuerbach's (1804–72) better known *The Essence of Christianity*. Nonetheless, his *Life of Jesus* inspired many others to write similar lives of Jesus imbued with the same historical critical sensibilities as Strauss. What was perhaps most important about Strauss' work for later biblical criticism, and for eroding the faith of people, was the way in which his work subtly drove a wedge between the portrait of Jesus depicted in the Gospels and the notion of the real Jesus lying behind what he saw as disparate portraits shaped by rival theological visions (Brown 1985, 183–204; Baird 1992, 246–58; Hahn and Morrow 2020).

The final figure we will look at here is Ernest Renan (1823–92), whose 1863 *Life of Jesus* was patterned on Strauss'. He hoped to do for the French-speaking

world what Strauss had done for the German-speaking world. Renan was an important Semitic philologist who specialized in the historical criticism of the Bible. It was Renan who taught the historical critical method to the famous Roman Catholic priest Alfred Loisy (1857–1940), later excommunicated in 1908 under Pope St. Pius X (1835–1914). Loisy would get in trouble with the Magisterium of the Catholic Church for his use of historical criticism, which led to his censure as a modernist during the modernist crisis in the early part of the twentieth century, but it was Loisy who was arguably most important for bringing the more skeptical historical critical methods of the past into the Catholic world (Théobald 1985, 387–439; Talar 2000, 191–211; Morrow 2019a; 2019b, 3–13). Like Strauss' work, Renan's relied upon the tools of historical biblical criticism, and, also like Strauss, Renan removed the miraculous from the life of Jesus, but he differed from Strauss in trying to reconstruct the mind of Jesus, and of removing Jesus from his Jewish context. Both Strauss and Renan are prime examples of popularizations of historical biblical criticism that had deleterious effects on the faith of people and inspired rationalism, skepticism, and general doubt on matters of faith among their readers (Olender 1989, 112–29; Masuzawa 2005, 191–2; Simon-Nahum 2007, 61–74).

Conclusion

Rather than beginning in the nineteenth century with the various lives of Jesus and related literature, historical biblical criticism has roots going all the way back to antiquity in Roman and Gnostic anti-Christian polemics. The criticisms forged in this more skeptical climate were further developed and elaborated in the medieval Muslim world, and it is from that medieval Muslim intellectual work that these doubts entered the Jewish and Christian world as exegetes attempted to respond to the challenges. The Renaissance and Reformation periods approached biblical exegesis with new philological tools and hermeneutics that they developed. In the early modern period, particularly in the seventeenth century, these humanistic tools were combined with a newly revived skeptical approach, the same philosophical skepticism that drove the more radical Enlightenment, creating a method for interpreting the Bible that began with methodological doubt and applied humanistic criticism without recourse to theological interpretation. Such methods resulted in lives of Jesus that drove a wedge between the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels and the Jesus these scholars claimed existed in history. Such studies contributed to the erosion of faith in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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Further Reading

Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought: 1778–1860*. An essential guide to the philosophical background to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historical Jesus research.

David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels*. This volume is helpful in situating the history of the Synoptic Problem, which is closely bound to historical Jesus scholarship, within the broader social and political history behind the development of this New Testament criticism.

Scott W. Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300–1700*. The most important volume to date on the early history of modern historical biblical criticism.

Scott W. Hahn and Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Modern Biblical Criticism as a Tool of Statecraft (1700–1900)*. This is an important book covering the history of modern historical biblical criticism from the eighteenth through the nineteenth century.

Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Theology, Politics, and Exegesis: Essays on the History of Modern Biblical Criticism*. This book explores the early history of modern biblical scholarship, focusing on the broader historical and political context to biblical scholarship's development.

Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Pretensions of Objectivity: Toward a Criticism of Biblical Criticism*. This book examines the early history of modern historical biblical criticism and looks at some of the philosophical and political concerns that shaped the methods.

J. C. O'Neill, *The Bible's Authority: A Portrait Gallery of Thinkers from Lessing to Bultmann*. This provides a helpful overview of some of the key biblical exegetes involved in historical Jesus and related historical critical research.

Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*. This is an important work uncovering the early modern history of biblical scholarship, showing especially the influence of English Deistic criticism on what would later emerge as German biblical criticism.

Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation Volume 4: From the Enlightenment to the Twentieth Century*. This is one of the most important overviews of biblical scholars, including historical Jesus scholars, from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, situating them within their historical contexts.

Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*. This is an important work pertaining to how eighteenth-century biblical scholarship transformed the Bible into an important cultural document that was redeployed during the Enlightenment based on the cultural and political concerns of the time.

PART IV

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CLASSICAL MODERNITY: PHILOSOPHICAL AND SCIENTIFIC CURRENTS

18

Romanticism

ASHLEY CLARK

This entry examines what the charges of 'pantheist' and 'atheist' meant for both Germans and Britons between the latter half of the eighteenth century through the first half of the nineteenth century. It attempts to clarify the meaning of these labels within, first, German idealism and, second, the cultural milieu of the German and British Romantic era. To accomplish this, it surveys how the figure of Prometheus was employed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and Percy Bysshe Shelley to illustrate the relationship between nature, philosophy, God, and man. This narrative arc provides a framework in which to review a number of historical events and key works that will help identify the position of atheism during this period.

Introduction to Idealism

Idealism has roots in Plato's theory of Forms, which became the seedbed for philosophical idealism. The primacy of ideas eventually spread, branching into theories on ethics, politics, aesthetics, and identity from Europe to India to Australia. The basic tenet that ties the schools of philosophical idealism together is a declaration of ideas as the basis of reality and the source of all knowledge. Or, as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) would explain it, "Idealism consists in the claim that there are none other than thinking beings" (1783, IV, 288–89). Idealists have populated a wide variety of fields promulgating a range of doctrines that both support and reject theism. This tension within idealist thinking came to a head in the eighteenth century when philosophers sought to locate their place in a causally conditioned world. As the Enlightenment secured the world with a sequence of causes and effects, it likewise unfastened human freedom, resulting in a series of important questions that would become central concerns for the German Idealists:

How could one reconcile a causally conditioned natural world with human autonomy? How could we account for morality? And where would this place the existence of God?

Through the Enlightenment, intellectuals across Europe sought to resolve the tension between doctrines of universal causality and human freedom. Some, like Locke (1632–1704), attempted to preserve a limited sense of freedom in our ability to suspend acting when under pressure from desire; others, like Descartes (1596–1650), argued that the will was by nature free; still others, like Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), claimed that human freedom existed only in understanding our dependence on God. Kant would later resolve the issue by distinguishing our theoretical experience, which required the application of the category of causality, from our moral experience, which required freedom of will to make sense of that experience. In these several efforts to preserve some notion of human freedom, the chief obstacle was a presumed existence of God, whose foreknowledge seemed to preclude freedom.

In the German-speaking lands, attempts to overcome this obstacle, especially those invoking Spinoza's philosophy, were often met with hostility. It was not until Frederick the Great (1712–86) established an intellectually free space and policy of toleration in the Prussian Kingdom that inquiries into whether or not we could know God's existence could be taken seriously. In the capital of Berlin, he fostered the development of the *Aufklärung* by reinvigorating the Academy of Sciences, which welcomed such luminaries as the mathematicians Joseph-Louis Lagrange (1736–1813) and Leonhard Euler (1707–83), the physiologist Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–51), and the polymath Pierre Louis Maupertuis (1698–1759), whom Frederick appointed president of the Academy. Because of Frederick II's benign policy, the Prussian lands became a free space for exploration in philosophy, science, and the arts. Several of the individuals on whom I will focus found there the freedom to pursue religious issues: It allowed Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1806) to succeed as a German-Jewish philosopher and, with others, to form the first Maskilic locus; it allowed Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81) to write *Nathan the Wise* (1779), a play of religious tolerance, in which Mendelssohn is very likely the model for the character Nathan (Beiser 1987, 102); it allowed Kant to explode Mendelssohn's proofs for the existence of God and to advance his own moral grounds for assuming the existence of God (1788); which in turn, allowed Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854) to build their own systems of idealism on the foundation of Kant's work; and as we will soon see, it provided Fichte a safe haven from accusations of atheism in Jena.

In the sections that follow, I introduce a brief history of Kantian and post-Kantian idealism beginning in the 1780s. I pause in 1785 to examine how Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819) embroiled two kingpins of the *Aufklärung* in what is known as the Pantheism Controversy. The kindle that ignited the controversy was a conversation Jacobi had with Lessing and his subsequent correspondence with Mendelssohn, both of which he hurriedly published under the title *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn* (*Über die Lehre des Spinoza, in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn,* 1785). The charges Jacobi levied against Lessing and Mendelssohn were not merely about their pantheistic views, but rather about the risk that rational philosophy – and Kant's transcendental idealism – posed to Jacobi's theism. Jacobi also ensnared Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) in the controversy when he employed the poet's "Prometheus" (Goethe 1.2, 7–8) to inaugurate the pantheism discussion. The response that these public accusations of atheism generated was widespread among German thinkers, resulting in more attention paid to the philosophies of both Spinoza and Kant. More focused attention on their works spurred new, more radical systems of idealism, which taken together would come to be known as German idealism. Moreover, as Frederick C. Beiser argues, these conflicts also created an impetus for Romanticism (already on the rise) to eclipse the waning *Aufklärung* (1987, 45). The concluding section of this chapter will reveal how the Prometheus myth, which kicked off the Pantheism Controversy, served as a leitmotif throughout the Romantic period.

Transcendental Idealism

In 1781, Kant published the first of his three critiques, the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In this work, he offered criticisms on the history of metaphysics and the boundaries of reason. He waged these criticisms against philosophers who attempted to leap beyond the phenomenal world to encounter objects behind the veil of experience, which he termed "things-in-themselves." For Kant, these included God and all His attributes. Kant believed that human intellect was confined to appearances, hemmed in by categories like causality and existence, that had their proper application only in the deliverances of the senses. He termed his project "transcendental idealism," which sought to examine the necessary structures of human knowing and the limitations appropriate to it. He thus distinguished his critique of reason from transcendent idealism of the Cartesian or Berkeleyan kind. His was not an idealism based on access to a realm beyond experience (access to "things-in-

themselves") – that was the sort he called "the childish endeavor of chasing after soap bubbles" – but was rather an examination of the a-priori (or transcendental) attributes of the faculty of cognition, or conditions of possible experience (Kant 1783, IV, 288–9). When it became clear that his readers conflated his *transcendental* idealism with those based on *transcendence*, Kant published a clarifying summary of his theory in which he wrote:

> For the fact that I have myself given to this theory of mine the name of transcendental idealism cannot justify anyone in confusing it with the empirical idealism of *Descartes* (although this idealism was only a problem, whose insolubility left everyone free, in *Descartes'* opinion, to deny the existence of the corporeal world, since the problem could never be answered satisfactorily) or with the mystical and visionary idealism of *Berkeley* (against which, along with other similar fantasies, our *Critique*, on the contrary, contains the proper antidote). (Kant 1783, IV, 293)

The confusion was likely abetted by the publication in German of Berkeley's major works in the same year as Kant's *First Critique* (1781).[1] What particularly irked Kant was the fact that the form of idealism Berkeley proposed was precisely what Kant sought to reject.

But an observer of the fray could be forgiven for being confused, since, seen from a certain distance, the two philosophers shared many similarities (Beiser 2002). For instance, Berkeley, like Kant, rejected materialist theories that suggested access to the existence of objects outside of immediate sensory perception. In Berkeley's view, the immediacy of perceptible objects constitutes the existence of those objects for human knowing: *esse est percipi* – to be is to be perceived – to which he added, *aut percipere* – to be is also to perceive (Berkeley 1710, §3). Thus, for both Kant and Berkeley, the real for human beings is that to which conscious experience testifies. As we will soon see, Fichte and Schelling would later adopt and amend this foundation.

Jacobi's Attack on Lessing and Mendelssohn

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi was not initially an adversary of Lessing or of Mendelssohn. The controversy was initiated by an exchange of letters between Jacobi and Mendelssohn via their mutual friend, Elise Reimarus

[1] The German translation of Berkeley's *Dialogues* was first published in 1756 by Johann Christian Eschenbach, but it was not until 1781 when Berkeley's *Philosophische Werke, Erste Theil* was published. Beiser, citing Arthur Warda (1922), notes that this is the copy Kant had in his library.

(1735–1805), a correspondent of many figures of the German Romantic period. Jacobi was friendly enough with Lessing to pay him a visit in 1780, during which, as he later claimed, Lessing had declared that "there is no other philosophy but the philosophy of Spinoza" (1785, 13). This was the first message he asked Reimarus to pass on to Mendelssohn. While this may seem a benign claim to make today, it was a loaded one in the 1780s. In fact, one of the reasons it appears an insignificant statement today is due to that conversation – or at least to Jacobi's side of the conversation. The charges of Spinozism levied by Jacobi, once made public, reignited interest in closer study of Spinoza's work, which in turn divorced it from its traditionally hostile interpretations.

Eighteenth-century Germans had come to know Spinoza's work not principally through his own texts, but through the interpretations (and condemnations) of Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) and Christian Wolff (1679–-1754) – at least until Jacobi reignited interest in Spinoza's pantheism in 1785. Wolff laid out his systematic refutation of Spinoza in reaction to another theological dispute that began when readers, most often pietists, conflated his work with that of Spinoza, leading to charges of fatalism that lost him his position at the University of Halle in 1723 – a harbinger of Fichte's fate in Jena three-quarters of a century later. The first difference between Wolff and Spinoza was that Wolff denied the concept of monism (one of Spinoza's central tenets, which included the collapse of God and nature as one) and instead declared a separation of body and soul that expressed a pre-existing harmony (Israel 2001, 549). The second discrepancy that Wolff recognized was between the necessary and the impossible, which he claimed Spinoza often conflated. According to Wolff, God's intellect and will are distinct: What God conceives is possible and what he wills is actual, whereas for Spinoza (in Wolff's interpretation), what God conceives as possibly existing comes necessarily to exist. In Wolff's view, God's will is free and he could have willed otherwise and, therefore, what he does will comes to exist contingently. Whereas for Spinoza (in Wolff's interpretation), what God conceives as possibly existing comes actually to exist and necessarily so (Morrison 1993, 409). For Spinoza, the world order is the only possible disposition of things; but Wolff (like Leibniz) declared that the state of things *could* be different depending on the free will of the divine – thus apparently freeing himself from accusations of fatalism. Yet, there remained Wolff's claim of a pre-established harmony between mind and body, which implies a strict determinism.

The debate over whether or not Wolff's systematic and mathematical reasoning revealed his Spinozism (i.e. fatalism) became, as Jonathan Israel argues, "one of the most formative cultural encounters of the eighteenth century and was, arguably, the most important of the age of Enlightenment in Central Europe and the Baltic before the French Revolution" (2001, 544). Upon inheriting the throne, Frederik II reinstated Wolff's employment in 1740. The ferment of the conflict, combined with the difficulty of Spinoza's original work, resulted in a tradition in German universities of teaching Spinoza through Wolff's works. So, by the time Jacobi revealed Lessing's acceptance of Spinoza's philosophy, the term "Spinozism" had become an ersatz for "fatalism." Jacobi raised the charge a notch: "Spinoza is atheism," he declared (1785, 170). Publishing Lessing's allegiance with Spinoza's philosophy, then, entailed accusing the great dramatist and *Aufklärer* of atheism.

As Jacobi told it, he had brought Lessing a poem to read. The title of the poem was "Prometheus," but the author, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, would only become acknowledged in the second edition of the Spinoza Letters in 1789. Lessing responded that although he did not know the poem beforehand, he liked it and said that the poem's viewpoint reflected his own. When Jacobi nudged him for clarification, Lessing pointed to Spinoza as the foundation of that viewpoint, thereby initiating the conversation about Spinoza (1785, 11). Because their multiday-long conversation was recorded by Jacobi only after the fact, and then published five years later, it is impossible to determine its verity. In fact, read in its entirety, it becomes clear that the purpose of the tract was not to allow Lessing to explain his viewpoint but rather to provide Jacobi a platform to detail why rationalist philosophy like Spinoza's (and as he thought, Kant's) could lead one only to atheism – a point we will return to shortly. But first, why did Jacobi leverage the poem "Prometheus" as the prompt for a discussion about atheism? And why did it then become a leitmotif for Romanticism across Europe?

The Procreative Genius of "Prometheus"

In the early 1770s, Goethe sought to resurrect the mythical Prometheus in a new dramatic text, but he settled on a 56-line free-verse poem. While the earliest account of Prometheus can be found in Hesoid's (~730 to 650 BC) *Theogony* (date unknown), it is Aeschylus' (~525 to 456 BC) *Prometheus Bound*

(date unknown) that is the most referenced ancient Greek treatment of the myth.[2] Prometheus, a Titan who begrudged the Olympians after the Titanomachy, favored man over the new pantheon of gods. Alongside his brother, Prometheus was tasked with molding humans out of clay. He defied Zeus by stealing the power of fire and gifting it to man. Zeus, angered by this transgression, chained Prometheus to a cliff in the Caucasus Mountains, where a giant eagle was sent to feast on his liver each day. As a demigod, his liver continually regenerated each night until Heracles finally killed the eagle, allowing for Prometheus' release. This is, at least, the skeleton of the Promethean myth that poets, authors, and musicians have fleshed out ever since, providing fodder for thought on humanism, theism, and atheism.

Prometheus would make several more appearances in Goethe's oeuvre. He plays a major role in Goethe's 1810 play *Pandora,* in which Prometheus' raucous spirit is juxtaposed to the bucolic nature of his brother Epimetheus (Goethe 1.50, 296–344). But it was Goethe's early poem that marked a shift in the mythical hero's status, inspiring works by representatives of the Romantic period: both Franz Schubert (1797–1828) and Hugo Wolf (1860–1903) set Goethe's poem to music; Ludwig von Beethoven (1770–1827) composed the music to Salvatore Viganò's (1769–1821) ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus* (1801); Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851) wrote *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818 and 1831); and her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) wrote *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) – just to name a few.

Goethe wrote "Prometheus" some time between 1772 and 1774, but did not publish it until 1789 alongside its twin poem "Ganymed" (Goethe 1.2, 79–80). The first poem, written in first-person narrative, ends this way:

> Here I sit, making men
> In my own image,
> A race (*Geschlecht*) that shall be like me,
> To suffer, to weep,
> To know joy and delight,
> And ignore you
> As do I. (WA I.2, 78)

Goethe's Prometheus typifies the rebellious Romantic hero who, embodying the power of genius, eclipses the power of God by creating man not in the image of Him, but in the form of a procreative self – a self that no longer

[2] For a detailed account of the history of the Prometheus myth, as well as an English translation and full explication of *Prometheus Bound*, see Podlecki's edited and translated version in Aeschylus (2005).

needs a God. David Wellbery states it best when he writes that Goethe's Prometheus "frees humanity to its originality, forms humanity such that humanity forms itself" (Wellbery 1996, 334).

Read by itself, it is not unreasonable to assume that Lessing indeed interpreted "Prometheus" in terms of Spinoza's pantheism. Because of the Titan's defiance, humans would no longer require God as their creator. Endowed with a self-forming, procreative force, they could create themselves. Read in tandem with its twin poem, however, new interpretations emerge. Ganymed, the boy ravished by the manifestation of Zeus as Spring, represents limitless love of, belief in, and necessity of God. Taken together, the poems illustrate the generative polarities that would later characterize Goethe's scientific studies as well as his approach to art. Life, Goethe would argue in sync with Schelling, is predicated on polarities that come together forming the whole of nature. The polar opposites of light and darkness beget the appearance of color. The systole and diastole of plants beget their metamorphoses. As Robert J. Richards explains, these polarities, particularly those expressed in plants, came to represent "universal forces of expansion and contraction – or, as one found them in the nonanimated sphere, forces of repulsion and attraction" (2002, 417). Joan Steigerwald extends this to polarities between "organic and intellectual development" and between "the imagination and discipline" (2002, 307, 315). Together, the polarities within the two poems complete a more holistic view of the human–God relationship. Apart, they only provide one side of the story. This distinction is important when one remembers that Jacobi's publication left the poem's author anonymous. Once Goethe did publish the poems, he did not publish them individually but rather together.

Jacobi had introduced Goethe to Spinoza the year before he published the poem and the letters. Richards illustrates how this introduction led Goethe to study Spinoza and ultimately incorporate his pantheistic approach in his own holistic approach to nature (2002, 378–9). But Goethe also recognized the effect his poem had on individuals as well as the history of philosophy when it was published in the Spinoza Letters. In his autobiography, *Truth and Poetry* (1811), he described how the poem "prompt[ed] Lessing to declare his views to Jacobi . . . and serv[ed] as tinder for an explosion that revealed the most secret concerns of men, concerns which, unknown even to themselves, slumbered in an otherwise enlightened society"[3] (Goethe 1887–1919, I.28,

[3] This comes from Book 15 of Part III of his *Truth and Poetry*.

313). Moreover, removing the poem from the realm of the poetic was not one of his original goals. Goethe went on to explain:

> Although, as it happened, one can attach philosophical and religious considerations to this subject, it really belongs to the realm of poetry. The titans are the foil to polytheism, just as one can consider the devil as the foil to monotheism. However, neither the latter nor God, to whom he stands in contrast, is a poetic figure. Milton's Satan, portrayed gallantly enough, remains in the detriment of subalternity as he attempts to destroy the splendid creation of a supreme Being. Prometheus, on the other hand, has the advantage of being able to create and form in his defiance of higher beings. It is also a beautiful and poetic thought to have human beings brought into being, not by the supreme ruler of the world, but by a middle figure who is sufficiently worthy and important enough to do this because he is a descendent of the oldest dynasty. Greek mythology offers an inexhaustible wealth of such divine and human symbols. (Goethe 1887–1919, 1.28, 313)

The Crux of the Pantheism Debate

The remainder of the Spinoza Letters reveals Jacobi's fluent understanding of Spinoza's works. At one point he expressed a love for Spinoza, but qualified that love: "I love Spinoza because he, more than any other philosopher, has led me to the complete conviction that certain things cannot be explained," which led him to declare that he had "no more living conviction than that I do what I think instead of just thinking what I do" (Jacobi 1785, 30). What he loved about Spinoza was his commitment to his method; his ability to rationalize all the way down. No other philosopher was as committed to reason without faith as Spinoza. But, this autonomy of reason, in Jacobi's eyes, could lead one only into atheism and nihilism (1785, 14). The only way out was a *Salto mortale,* a kind of somersault that would allow the enlightened philosopher to bring his feet from atop his head back down to the ground (1785, 17). In other words, one could not prove the existence of God through formal demonstrations but rather through living a godly and moral life. Lessing declined the invitation to perform such a move, cheekily blaming his legs as too old and fragile for such a trick (1785, 34).

As representatives of the *Aufklärung,* Lessing and Mendelssohn were not much more than scapegoats in Jacobi's attack on the Enlightenment's confidence in reason – the kind of reasoning that Jacobi also thought Kant epitomized in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, for Kant, objections to the proofs of God's existence actually made room for faith in Him. In the

preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant likened his critical method to his challenge against the traditional proofs of God. Kant did not want to be led by blind faith in God any more than he wanted to be led by blind faith in reason: "I had to therefore cast out *knowledge* in order to make room for *belief*; the dogmatism of metaphysics, i.e., the preconception that it makes progress without a critique of pure reason, is the true source of all the unbelief (always extremely dogmatic) which conflicts with morality" (1781, B XXX: original emphasis).

What resulted from the Pantheism Controversy was a revival of Spinoza's works and the introduction of Kant's into mainstream philosophical thinking as people tried to stabilize the pendulum that seemed to swing from rational nihilism to irrational fideism. Wolff was no longer the authority on Spinoza's destiny. Thus, it can easily be said that the Pantheism Controversy set the agenda for both German idealism and Romanticism.

German Idealism in Jena

One young philosopher who paid close attention to Kant's work, as well as the continuing charges that Jacobi and others would levy against it, was Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Fichte admired Kant enough to visit him in 1791, the same year that Kant's final *Critique* was published. The next year, unbeknownst to either philosopher, a book of Fichte's titled *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation* (*Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*) was anonymously published (Fichte 1792). The likeness to Kant in style and rhetoric did not go undetected. As Richards shows, it was probably this likeness coupled with Kant's endorsement of the book that grabbed Goethe's attention enough to hire Fichte for the open position in the Faculty of Philosophy at the university in Jena (2002, 61). Once employed at Jena, Fichte continued to follow Kant's *Critiques* as well as his critics. Committed to Kantian philosophy, Fichte worked to ameliorate the claims against it, eventually forming his own variant of idealism.

While adopting the transcendental method, Fichte located a problem that Kant had not resolved; namely, that transcendental philosophy could claim the existence of a thing-in-itself as a mind-independent entity. As previously mentioned, Kant's critical philosophy allowed for things-in-themselves to exist outside of our own perception. Unlike in Berkeley's idealism, these things-in-themselves start and remain independent of the human mind. But – and this marks the paradox – such an entity (in Kant's works) is supposed to be unknowable. So, what Fichte had to ask was, how can a subject know an object that is not only outside of itself, but for which the categories, including

that for existence, are inapplicable? (1845, 475–6) It turns out that for Fichte, and later for Schelling, one simply could not justify such a claim. But Berkeley's idealism was also not the answer because it did not hold to what Fichte took to be the foundational aim of philosophy: to demonstrate objective reality without resorting to a transcendent God. Fichte then sought to reconcile the inconsistency in Kant's critical reasoning by searching for the singular principle upon which all philosophy could be founded – and which would finally reconcile human freedom with necessity (1845, 423).

Fichte reworked and refined his *Science of Knowledge* (*Wissenschaftslehre*) in at least ten different written versions (many of which were published posthumously), trying to get it right. The basis of this work, the "I" that posits itself for both itself and the world, would become the kernel of German idealism. Fichte lay this foundation in 1794–5 in his first tract, *The Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge* (*Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre*). The first principle, he believed, had to be found in an autonomous ego that "self-posited" or reproduced itself (1845, 96–8). For Fichte, it was the simultaneous action of the subjective self and existence of the subjective self; the producer and product of itself; and a unity of the fact of consciousness and the act of consciousness that can also be found in every other fact and act. This self-sufficient procreative power is similar to the power embodied in Goethe's "Prometheus." Recall that it was Goethe's Prometheus who formed men such that they could form themselves. I do not mean to conflate the two. Goethe and Fichte had very different projects that, at some points, opposed one another. Fichte was an exemplary philosopher, while Goethe, on the other hand, made it clear that he was first and foremost a poet. As we have already seen, Goethe believed that Prometheus and his powers were best kept in the realm of the poetic. However, the regenerative, procreative power that characterized both Fichte's self-positing "I" and the self-forming humans that Prometheus formed reverberated throughout the Romantic movement that both Fichte and Goethe would inspire.[4] Soon, Schelling would present a variant of Fichte's philosophy that depended precisely on the poetic.

In 1799, Jacobi resurfaced as a vociferous critic of Fichte's new philosophy. As you might be able to guess by now, it was Fichte's faithful commitment to a systemization of reason that perturbed Jacobi beyond measure. He made his point heard in a 57-page response he published under the title "An Open Letter to Fichte" (1799). His complaint was so strong that he uprooted Spinoza as the paradigmatic rationalist: "I say it at every opportunity, and I am ready to publicly

[4] For a full explication of how the self, nature, and poetry contributed to "the Romantic mode of being and thought," see Richards (2002).

confess that I consider you the true Messiah of Speculative Reason, the real son of the promise of a purely, in and by itself existing philosophy" (1–2). The open letter was written in response to a dialogue of essays that Fichte had published in a journal he was editing. Fichte had printed "Development on the Concept of Religion" by Friedrich Karl Forberg (1770–1848) in tandem with his own essay, "On the Ground of Our Belief in a Divine World-Governance" (1798, 21–46; 1798, 1–20). Forberg had rejected the notion of theoretical assertions of God's existence as well as the potential for any philosophical discussion of religion. By including his own essay, Fichte attempted to clarify his views and thus differentiate them from Forberg's skepticism. Fichte (like Kant and Forberg) rejected traditional proofs of God's existence, but he also identified God, and belief in God, as the one singular certainty. Belief in God allowed one to believe in sensible things. His attempt at distancing his essay from Forberg's, however, did not succeed and they were both accused of atheism – particularly by those who were already critical of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. Jacobi's public letter was only one of many bringing the charge of atheism against Fichte. By 1800, Fichte had been let go of his professorship in Jena and made his way to Berlin, where he was free to elaborate on his religious views in *The Vocation of Man* (*Die Bestimmung des Menschens,* 1799).

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling was already established on the University of Jena faculty by the time of Fichte's expulsion. Schelling had been drawn to Jena in 1797 because of Fichte and the philosophical circle that would become known as the *Frühromantiker*, or Early Romantics. Like Fichte, he was a follower of Kant who was primarily concerned with resolving the problem of the thing-in-itself; a problem that if resolved would also solve the problem of human freedom. In 1795, Schelling published *On Self as Principle of Philosophy, or on the Unconditioned in Human Knowledge* (*Vom Ich als Prinzip der Philosophie oder über das Unbedingte im menschlichen Wissen*). As the title suggests, Schelling followed Fichte's lead in locating the foundational principle of philosophy in the "I," but Schelling would push Fichte's subjective idealism further: He wanted a firmer grasp on how we could know the objective world (the not-I). In the preface, Schelling brought Spinoza's work to the fore – a move that you may rightly recognize as risky. He pointed to Spinoza's system as both worthy of study but also predicated on collapsible principles. To safeguard himself from accusations of Spinozism, he spoke directly to his readers:

> On the one hand, this essay is meant to abolish the very foundations of Spinoza's system . . . or more aptly, to topple it by means of its own principles; but on the other hand, Spinoza's system, with all its errors,

> seems to me infinitely more worthy of high esteem because of its bold consequences than the popular coalition systems of our intellectual world, which, from a patchwork of all possible systems, become the death of true philosophy. (Schelling 1856–61, I, 151)

Just as Fichte worked tirelessly refining his *Wissenschaftslehre*, Schelling continually refined his *Naturphilosophie*. Schelling did not want to explain external phenomena by resorting to things-in-themselves (the conditions of which we could not know), nor did he want the natural world subsumed in the ego, particularly not in the individual, empirical, subjective (and thus conditioned) ego that Berkeley endorsed. Rather, Schelling believed that we could understand the natural world *by way of* the ego – that the phenomena explained by the natural sciences could be traced back to the unconditioned ego. He defined his founding principle the *absolute*. For Schelling, it was this absolute "I" that was self-positing. In other words, the absolute (and thus unconditioned) "I" entailed, for Schelling, the form of self-positing that gave each empirical "I" its possibility. His resolution introduced the procreative force of aesthetic genius that could intuit the principles of nature, thus equating the procreative force of nature with the procreative force of the ego. It was in his endorsement of the parallel powers of nature and art that he, as Richards shows, found common ground with Goethe (2002, 469–70).

But where did God fit into Schelling's system? Before joining the Faculty of Philosophy in Jena, Schelling had studied theology in Tübingen. He may have abandoned his seminary studies, but he never abandoned his belief. Having safeguarded himself from accusations of Spinozism (i.e. atheism) in the 1795 essay, Schelling was able to incorporate elements of Spinoza's notion of a dynamic substance into *Naturphilosophie*. God's existence was evident not in traditional proofs, for proofs, he held, could only explain the conditional (Schelling 1856–61, I, 308). God remained an absolute being who, like the absolute ego, is not an actual being but the continual act of becoming and could only be intelligible in instantiations of itself (Schelling 1856–61, I, 308–9). Schelling dedicated his later works to exploding his notion of positive philosophy, in which God cannot be encapsulated in an idea, but rather that God *is* the idea/God *is* Being.

"Prometheus" Revisited: Atheism and Romanticism in the English Tradition

One of the most conspicuous figures to come out of the Romantic era was Frankenstein. Or, more precisely, Frankenstein's monstrous creation. The

eponymous Frankenstein was the doctor who had formed and created the monster. Mary Shelley highlighted the doctor's generative quality in her title: *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. But it is the monster who, after reading Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and Plutarch's *Lives* (~AD 100), reads Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and juxtaposes Adam's creation by God against his own by Frankenstein (1818, chapter 15).

The full name of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley reveals the intimate connections the author had throughout her life. Shelley, though never a self-described atheist, was always surrounded by atheism. Her father, William Godwin (1756–1836), hinted at his atheistic thought in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793) – an attempt to apply the "methodical and elementary way of the principles of science" to politics after "the great change that has been produced in men's mind upon this subject, and the light that has been thrown upon it by the recent discussions of America and France" (1–2). Godwin was primarily concerned with reconciling politics with morality, and he outlined how that remarriage could be achieved through reason. Actions, he argued, were governed by feelings – but these feelings could be tempered by reason. It was imperative that one sharpen her tool of reason through education, which he and his wife Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) believed should be accessible by all. His radically democratic system critiqued political reason in much the same way Kant had critiqued pure reason; both challenged the roots of reason in order to sturdy it against its critics (Michael 2015). With a focus on human freedom and morality, both books would cultivate the ground upon which Romanticism would blossom. And while Godwin did not make atheism his central point in the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, it is clear that his readers detected it between the lines. The book simultaneously inspired some and provoked others to respond to the apparent atheism in it.

Percy Shelley, who would later marry Godwin and Wollstonecraft's daughter Mary, was particularly intrigued by Godwin's political philosophy. Shelley laid his atheistic leanings bare first in a short pamphlet titled *The Necessity for Atheism* (1811), and then in poetic form in *Queen Mab* (1813) and, finally, in his dramatic poem, *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). *The Necessity*, which was published and distributed anonymously, resulted in his (like Wolff's and Fichte's) expulsion from his academic institution, this time at Oxford.[5] But Shelley reworked and expanded *The Necessity* into a footnote of (the heavily footnoted) *Queen Mab*. He began the updated version with the statement

[5] For a full explication of Shelley's expulsion, see Worthen (2019, chapter 5).

"There is no God" (1915, 1). Shelley later elaborated that "God is an hypothesis, and, as such, stands in need of proof: the *onus probandi* rests on the theist" (1915, 5). Proofs of the Diety, he declared, all fall under one of three divisions: the senses, reason, and testimony. He used the text to demonstrate the deficiency of proofs based on all three and claimed that "the mind *cannot* believe the existence of a creative God: it is also evident that, belief is a passion of the mind, no degree of criminality is attachable to disbelief" (1915, 5; original emphasis). In it, he quoted Newton, Pliny, and – at the very end – Spinoza:

> For everything has happened through the power of God: indeed, since the power of nature is nothing but that very power of God, it is certain that we fail to understand the power of God insofar as we are ignorant of natural causes; so it is very silly to refer something to the power of God when we are ignorant of its natural causes – if that is itself the power of God.
>
> (Translation cited in Matthews and Everest 2014, 391)

His rejection of the potential for a proof of God's existence – and the idea that we "are ignorant" of the power of God – may fall under the guise of agnosticism today, but one must remember that the idea behind that term (a term not yet coined) fell under the umbrella of atheism in the early nineteenth century.

Shelley's Prometheus, like Goethe's, existed in the poetic realm, in a four-act play. But unlike Goethe, Shelley foregrounded this in a preface: "Poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors, and musicians, are, in one sense, the creators, and in another, the creations, of their age" (1820, xiii). Shelley presented not only a poem on the formation of self-forming, he represented the poet as the creator and creation of his age. Moreover, poetry was, for Shelley, an act of social duty that could form and reform society without appeal to a transcendent being. In his preface, he reiterated that while poetry should not be didactic, it should communicate "beautiful idealisms of moral excellence" (xiv). These poetic illustrations would serve as a guiding light to his readers. In other words, by 1820, both Prometheus and the poet were bringers of light to procreative humanity.

Conclusion

The chapters in this handbook reveal how polysemic the term "atheism" is across time and space. "Idealism" is, in much the same way, also difficult to pin down to a singular definition. While both terms can be explained in contrast to their opposites (i.e. atheism as the opposite of theism, or belief in the existence of God; idealism as the opposite of realism or materialism), such

definitions produce little understanding of how the employment of the terms has affected the history of philosophy. In order to evaluate the role of atheism during the Romantic era, one must likewise review what one means by "Romanticism." As Isaiah Berlin, Timothy Michael, Robert J. Richards, and John Tresch all show, Romanticism was *not merely* a strong emotive reaction to the Enlightenment's primacy of reason (that movement was the earlier one that bore Goethe's "Prometheus," *Sturm und Drang*), but rather a movement that comprised a variety of attempts to bridge objective reason and subjective feeling (Berlin 2013; Michael 2015; Richards 2002; Trensch 2012). Taken together, the Romantics can be seen to test the limits of both reason and emotion; value individual liberty over autocracy; prioritize nature over the metropolis; and avow the generative power of poetry.

In this chapter, I have introduced a series of events in which charges of atheism (usually under the pseudonyms "Spinozism," "pantheism," and "fatalism") instigated personal and professional conflicts, turning friends into adversaries and exorcizing scholars from their academic institutions. Taken together, the Pantheism Controversy and Atheism Dispute illuminate how atheism contributed to the development of idealism. Interestingly, it was three dramatist-poets who brought Spinoza back into philosophical discourse: Lessing, Goethe, and Shelley. What I also hope to have illustrated in this chapter is how the characteristic of self-formation unfolded at the end of the eighteenth century and became fundamental in the development of both idealism and the Romantic era well into the nineteenth century.

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19

John Stuart Mill on Religion, Utility, and Morality

ROSARIO LÓPEZ

A well-known passage in John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* reads: 'I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it' (CW I, 45).[1] Judging by this statement, a reader would perhaps think that Mill has little to say about religion. After all, he admits to never having been religious, which seems like a clear-cut and unproblematic statement. But often non-religious thinkers are among those who elaborate on the question most profusely.

John Stuart Mill (1806–73) was a British philosopher and politician, best known for his defence of individual liberties, political representation, utilitarian ethics, and naturalism. The impressive amount of writings he left behind, the variety of topics he deals with, and the intense intellectual relationship with many relevant figures of his time make him one of the most important nineteenth-century thinkers. This chapter examines Mill's particular form of secular humanism and his thoughts on religion, the existence of God, the experience of the supernatural, and the possibility of having a secular religion. This means addressing his so-called Religion of Humanity, his relationship with Auguste Comte and Jeremy Bentham, and its implications for his utilitarianism and empiricism. As a result, this chapter also functions as a comment on how Mill deals with the received tradition of utilitarian ethics and the empiricist tradition, his independence and originality as a thinker, and his defence of individual liberties and liberal principles.

In terms of the primary sources analysed, it is important to note that the book where he deals expressly and at great length with the topic, *Three Essays on Religion*, was published posthumously, in 1874. This means that his contemporaries would not have had access to a complete analysis of the topic during Mill's lifetime. However, they would have been able to read, for

[1] All references to John Stuart Mill's writings are to *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, referred to as CW.

instance, *On Liberty* (1859) and *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865), in which Mill's opinions on the matter are also discussed. Contemporaries were also able to witness the role that he attributed to his religious belief while he was a Member of Parliament, where he was generally evasive about the topic.

The present chapter aims at being respectful of Mill's deliberate way of presenting his writings to the public, and sees our purpose as contemporary readers to try to ascertain how ideas were understood by past agents. In the development of this chapter, I follow Mill's temporal framework and a gradual disclosure of his ideas, instead of a thematically oriented, atemporal discussion. This chapter will follow a somewhat chronological development of Mill's remarks and ideas on religion, therefore discussing his posthumous publications at the end – not a very common way of proceeding in the literature on the topic.

Commentators on Mill's Idea of Religion

Mill's ideas on religion have attracted little attention among contemporary commentators, as compared to other areas of his thought, and his essays on religion remain relatively unknown today. Among his writings on religion, the most neglected are the *Three Essays on Religion*, partly because of the controversy that followed their publication. Additionally, I have not been able to find a study thematizing how Mill dealt with his ideas on religion while having a public life as an activist, politician, and Member of Parliament.

A number of contemporary studies have nevertheless acknowledged that his ideas on religion are inextricably linked to his approach to epistemology, ethics, and politics, and throw light on how legitimate knowledge, actions, and policies go hand in hand. For instance, Linda Raeder's study convincingly makes the case that 'neither Mill's philosophy nor his politics can be adequately comprehended without taking into account his religious views and purposes' (Raeder 2002, 1).

A controversy concerns the consistency of Mill's advocacy for a secular religion throughout his life. Scholars disagree on how secular Mill really was, or whether he was more sympathetic towards religion by the end of his life. This controversy can also be summarized in the difficulty reconciling his earlier works on the topic with *Theism*,[2] in which he ends up defending intelligent design and the benefits of irrational hope in an afterlife. Early commentators like John Morley, and later Alan Millar and H. J. McCloskey,

[2] One of the *Three Essays on Religion*, which will be discussed in detail below.

have pointed out the clash between Mill's earlier and later views (Morley 1875; McCloskey 1971, 161; Millar 1998).

Authors like Linda Raeder and Joseph Hamburger argue that a secular humanist religion was for Mill consistently the highest form of religious belief (Hamburger 1999; Raeder 2002), while scholars like Lou Matz stress his change of opinion as a sign of his long-standing sympathy towards supernatural religions. Matz suggests that Mill would have pressed the argument against supernatural illusions too far and he would have changed his mind towards the end of his life, when he wrote *Theism* (Matz 2000, 139; 2017, 280). In this vein, Alan Sell finds Mill's utilitarianism more likely than other variants to be compatible with a Christian worldview, while Timothy Larsen has recently published a biography in which he highlights the presence and prominence of Mill's spirituality throughout his life and work (Sell 2004; Larsen 2018).

Potential internal contradictions and changes in emphasis and tone are already a commonplace when discussing Mill's work. Scholars like James Fitzjames Stephen, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Isaiah Berlin have long debated inconsistencies to the point of arguing for the existence of 'two Mills' (Stephen [1874] 1967; Himmelfarb 1974, 7–49; Berlin 2002, 132–51). In this case, the essay *Theism* could represent another illustrative example of Mill being inconsistent, contradictory, or simply changing his mind. It stands as a healthy reminder that, when examining philosophers' ideas, internal consistency throughout their lives should not be automatically assumed and contradictions could be left unresolved (Skinner 1969, 19–20).

Religion, Epistemology, and Ethics: Mill, Bentham, and the Role of Utilitarianism and Empiricism

Mill's ideas on religion cannot be understood without reference to epistemological and moral traditions of his time. To consider the existence of God is not just a metaphysical question, but also one that involves a position about how to achieve knowledge about the world, and whether this knowledge is morally good.

His ideas develop within an empiricist tradition, which roots knowledge in our sensory experience as individuals. Generally speaking, for empiricists knowledge can be gained only through the senses, which is the keystone of science. In a nutshell, whatever does not come from experience would be nonsense, or speculation, and should not be considered as reliable knowledge

of the world according to scientific standards. Truth is a synonym of provable knowledge, preferably by scientific induction. We should understand Mill as part of this well-known philosophical tradition that could also list Bentham, among others, as one of its proponents. And in so far as the knowledge of God transcends the senses, there is no certain evidence of his existence.

A moral question then emerges, which assesses the rightness or wrongness of beliefs in general, and religious faiths in particular, regardless of their truth content. For both Mill and Bentham, utilitarianism will provide the framework for this assessment. Utilitarians' conception of good is tangled with ideas of utility, a key concept that has been defined in different ways. For classical utilitarians, like Bentham and Mill, maximizing utility would be crucial, although they had different notions of utility. Unlike Bentham, Mill thought about religious feelings as legitimate ethical needs. Thus, the question could be posed as follows: could religious beliefs be morally good (i.e. useful), regardless of their truth content, if they promote the improvement of society? Mill would reply affirmatively to this question, while Bentham would not. This has to do, among other things, with the different value that they attached to human imagination (on this point, see Heydt 2006, 109–14).

Many of Bentham's writings aimed at sweeping away religious beliefs from society, and there is no doubt that for him believing in supernatural entities and phenomena were pernicious and that Christianity was a harmful superstition – that is, it was not helpful for maximizing happiness for the greatest number (Crimmins 1986). Moreover, religious sanctions or rewards were an obstacle for necessary political reform. The 'spiritual world of religion' and the 'perceptible world of physical experience' were for him mutually exclusive worlds (Crimmins 1986, 97). So in Bentham's view, the utility value of a belief cannot be divorced from its truth content, or to put it differently, a false belief is not useful in a Benthamite utilitarian sense, merely because it is not true, that is, it is fictitious and irrational (Crimmins 2010).

But for Mill the response to this question is more complex, and it is tied up with his reassessment of Bentham's utilitarianism. According to Mill, religion might have a positive effect on society. A secular, humanist, and godless religion, which he would label the Religion of Humanity, is the sort of religion that Mill would preferably endorse. But it is important to concede that he does see some benefits of religious beliefs beyond their truth content. While he does not abandon an empirical tradition in epistemology, his utilitarianism would not consider irrational hopes as completely pointless or pernicious. As long as religion fosters social progress, Mill would not

object to it. This will become clear when analysing his *Three Essays on Religions*, and particularly *Theism*, but it is necessary to briefly address the topic against the background of his reinterpretation of Bentham's utilitarianism.

As early as 1833, Mill published anonymously an essay against utilitarianism titled *Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy*, later complemented with *Bentham* (1838) and *Utilitarianism* (1861). Utilitarianism was perceived as a kind of secular creed at the time. Mill does not revise utilitarianism as a whole, but rather some of its conclusions and central concepts. Bentham was honoured as 'a great seminal mind', opening up 'rich veins of original and striking speculation', but wrong in some ways (CW X 77; see also Priestley 1985, xv). For instance, Mill criticizes Bentham for overlooking how actions and beliefs might have an effect on the long-term character and the morality of agents. Instead of cold calculus machines, Mill perceived human consciousness as a complex state. Therefore, religious beliefs, even if wrong, could have an effect on character, and this should be taken into account when aiming at maximizing utility. The general goals and methods of Bentham's utilitarianism were not wrong, according to Mill, but the understanding of utility and the human mind needed revision. This strategy of partly reformulating a theory, while preserving another part of it, will become familiar in the remaining part of this chapter.

Freedom of Thought and Dissensus in *On Liberty*

On Liberty (1859) continues to represent up until today a classic and influential defence of the value of individual and political liberties. Among other things, this book aims at extending freedom of opinion and debate, which would include the possibility of criticizing religion. Mill contends that we should seek the effective 'collision of adverse opinions', to the point that 'if opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them' as the 'devil's advocate' (CW XVIII, 245). This way, we will have 'living truths' rather than a 'dead dogma' (CW XVIII, 243). Ultimately, Mill believes that such criticism would help demolish Christianity, or at least it would help people find what is of value in Christianity and reconcile it with a secular social morality (a task that he later carries out in his *Three Essays on Religion*). In this sense, Mill argues that:

> [T]he sayings of Christ ... contain, only a part of the truth; that many essential elements of the highest morality are among the things which are

> not provided for, nor intended to be provided for, in the recorded deliverances of the Founder of Christianity, and which have been entirely thrown aside in the system of ethics erected on the basis of those deliverances by the Christian Church. (CW XVIII, 256)

Linda Raeder has understood Mill's claim for real and vigorous debate not only as a way of dismantling Christianity, but also as part of his plan to implement a Religion of Humanity (Raeder 2002). Lou Matz argues instead that Mill's aim was to stop considering religion as protected or unquestioned traditional morality (Matz 2017, 283).

Mill and Comte: A Religion of Humanity

In 1865, Mill published *Auguste Comte and Positivism*. Mill had first encountered Comte's ideas through Gustave d'Eichtal in 1828, and as such he was one of the first followers of positivism in Britain, but it was only many years later, in 1865, when he fully disclosed his assessment of Comte's ideas. Mill thought that Comte, like Bentham, was one of the great minds of his time. However, Mill believed that positivism should be redefined and reinterpreted in a way that is helpful for society. One of the aspects to be reformulated is the Religion of Humanity, which will be explained below.[3]

F. E. L. Priestley draws an analogy between Bentham and Comte when it comes to Mill's 'tactics' for approaching both minds and philosophical systems. Priestley argues that while Mill perceives utilitarianism and positivism as 'valid and important doctrines', these should be corrected because of both Bentham's and Comte's intellectual shortcomings (Priestley 1985, xlvii). The strategy, recurrent in Mill's writings, consists of rescuing from two different philosophical systems and traditions whatever he thinks is valuable, and mixing them to try to find a compromise between the two. Mill's eclecticism accounts for the fact that he saw himself as building bridges and reconciling opposites. In this case, what positivism lacks is to be found in utilitarianism: 'M. Comte has got hold of half the truth, and the so-called liberal or revolutionary school possesses the other half; each sees what the other does not see, and seeing it exclusively, draws consequences from it which to the other appear mischievously absurd' (CW X, 315).

Mill then draws attention to the similarities between them in order to combine both traditions. He describes positivism as a lax empiricism,

[3] This section discusses Mill's adoption of this idea and disregards other areas of influence. For Comte's general influence on Mill, see Mueller (1956, 92–133).

therefore establishing a lineage that links Bacon, Hume, Bentham, and Comte, among others – what he calls 'phaenomenal' and 'experiential philosophy' (CW X, 267). Thus, for Mill, there is no contradiction between being a utilitarian and a positivist, as they are both against a metaphysical understanding of reality. Comte is against 'a priori philosophy in morals, jurisprudence, psychology, logic, even physical science', which means that he shares enemies with utilitarians (CW X, 300). Moreover, the idea of a Religion of Humanity seems to match utilitarian ethics in the sense that both suggest standards of conduct not based on metaphysical conceptions but rather on the duty towards other human beings, both in the present and the future.

Mill understood the Religion of Humanity as a shift from philosophy to religion, although the latter was not to be considered in 'its ordinary sense', but as 'a religion without a God' (CW X, 331). Mill thinks that, although it might be surprising, 'a religion may exist without belief in a God', and this could be an 'instructive and profitable object of contemplation' (CW X, 331). If there is no god, the object of contemplation is the 'Grand Être, Humanity, or Mankind' (CW X, 335). The object of devotion is not an omnipotent creator, but instead a disinterested aim: the welfare of society. Mill thus incarnated the Victorian worry about the future of humanity, and as a secular humanist he devised a moral code to promote progress and improve society at large.

The Religion of Humanity as suggested by Comte provided a model that all other religions should follow. Other faiths 'are made better' if they get closer to this way of understanding religion (CW X, 334). A secular humanist religion accounted for the majesty of the idea of mankind, and placed 'the general interest of the human race, both as a source of emotion and as a motive to conduct' (CW X, 335). In other words, Mill saw the Religion of Humanity as conducive to utilitarianism and perfectly compatible with it.[4] One of the best features of this secular religion was, according to Mill, that it combined both historical and present-day knowledge in order to provide a moral code, thus giving individuals a kind of immortality (Mueller 1956, 132). 'Guided by history', Mill sees humanity as a 'single image', and he begins to consider its improvement as the main goal of our actions (CW X, 335).

Much as the Religion of Humanity was helpful in providing moral and religious guidance without the metaphysics of Christianity, Mill also saw the potential evil in it. It provided reasons for action according to the interests of mankind, and this implied a kind of altruism according to which the 'good of others' was the criterion for action. If this were to be pushed too far,

[4] See also this point in Wright (1986, 45).

individual liberties would be potentially threatened by a social morality. Mill criticizes Comte for imposing this kind of external authority. The will of individuals should be, according to Mill, the criteria for action, but it would ideally conform to the general welfare of society. To put it differently, individual liberties should conform to utilitarian ethics, and not the other way round (CW X, 337).

It should be remembered that Mill published *Auguste Comte and Positivism* in 1865, not long after *On Liberty* (1859), his clearest defence of individual liberties. It is in this context that we should understand Mill's statement that 'M. Comte is a morality-intoxicated man' (CW X, 337; Mueller 1956, 133). While the general idea about placing humanity as the abstract source for moral actions was unquestioned, Mill thought of Comte's morality in practice as an example of the dangers of having an external state interfering with individual liberties, that is, as a case of 'despotism over the individual' (CW XVIII, 29).

In view of these disagreements between Mill and Comte, it would be too simplistic to say that 'on the question of religion . . . Mill remained entirely in agreement with Comte' (Wright 1986, 43). Their relationship was complex at both intellectual and personal levels, and knowing some details about their personal relationship seems crucial. The correspondence between them shows great admiration from both sides, and particularly on this topic Mill sees that the idea of a shared feeling of humanity is the only way to regenerate morality (CW XIII, 561). But Comte's precise plans show his eccentricities and 'personal idiosyncrasies' (Wright 1986, 40) to an extent that Mill was not prepared to endorse. Comte's 'mania for regulation' (CW X, 344) and the detailed nature of his cult and ceremonies seemed extraordinary and unacceptable to Mill, who refused an over-systematization of everyday life. Mill rejected Comte's understanding of this secular religion as 'a cult, a dogma and a regime' that would 'reach into every corner and aspect of social life' (Wernick 2018, 219). These disagreements were worsened by other discrepancies on the role of women, psychology, and economics (on this topic, see Simon 1963, 172–201).

Mill as a Member of Parliament

A discussion of Mill's religious views should mention, even if briefly, how Mill presented himself to the public during electoral debates and political meetings. This will serve as a complement for an analysis of his writings, while it will also help us understand how his contemporaries judged Mill.

Besides the somewhat abstract and philosophical ideas in his writings, he was a well-known public figure.

Mill was elected a Member of Parliament for Westminster in 1865, and later failed to win a seat in the 1868 election. During a meeting with the electorate in 1865, he was asked a question on the topic: 'Has Mr. Mill any confidence in and sympathy with the religion taught by Jesus Christ and his apostles; and does he believe that a State Church is a benefit to this nation or otherwise? (Cries of Don't answer)' (CW XXVIII, 38). Mill declined to answer questions about his religious creed, a decision that was celebrated by the audience, while declaring that on the state church 'there ought to be no such thing', but it was premature to abolish it at the time. In general, Mill advocated for a gradual separation of church and state, although as a provisional measure it would be wiser first 'to try and improve the Church itself through the State, than to abolish the connection which in principle he objected to' (CW XXVIII, 38; on this topic, see Kinzer et al. 1992, 67). Mill's challenge was to remain faithful to his political ideals while trying to appear as a viable political option: not too radical to be seated as a Member of Parliament, and not too moderate to betray his ideals.

The 1868 campaign illustrates Mill's aim at being discreet when it came to the public display of religious beliefs. He regarded religious opinions as a very private matter. This time his caution was compromised by his support for the atheist Charles Bradlaugh, who was also running for Parliament. Mill was then perceived as backing far left, dangerous political ideas. As Kinzer points out, for the public Bradlaugh was an 'advocate of immorality and atheism' and his endorsement was therefore problematic (Kinzer et al. 1992, 289). This was a scandal that contributed to Mill's defeat in 1868. He could not avoid being perceived as too radical since he financed Bradlaugh's campaign, although his unsuccessful policy was still to keep his own religious ideas private (Kinzer et al. 1992, 289; Hamburger 1999, 84).

Mill's *Three Essays on Religion: Nature, Utility of Religion, and Theism*

Mill's *Three Essays on Religion* were published posthumously in 1874, a year after the publication of his *Autobiography*. According to his daughter, Helen Taylor, Mill envisaged them as a 'deliberate and exhaustive treatment' of the topic (CW X, 371).

Nature and *Utility of Religion* were written between 1850 and 1858 (that is, while he was also working on *Principles of Political Economy* and *On Liberty*).

Theism was, however, drafted between 1868 and 1870 (CW X, 371). Out of the three, the first two seem to have been written in collaboration with Mill's wife, Harriet Taylor (Raeder 2002, 89).[5] Helen Taylor also states that Mill's opinions on religion did not change substantially during his lifetime and these three essays are thus 'fundamentally consistent' with each other (CW X, 371). Readers would perhaps welcome these remarks as a relief. The expectation of consistency is somewhat reassuring. We are promised the avoidance of discomfort often felt when Mill's philosophy results in contradictions. But as mentioned above, many commentators have pointed out that *Theism* implies a 'startling' change in tone (Reeves 2008, 475).

The fact that they were published posthumously points to the potential controversy that he thought could arise following publication. These essays were received as either being too critical for religious believers or too generous for religious sceptics. Out of the three, the most controversial was *Theism*, and it is interesting to notice that the essay was published as a first draft and therefore was not proofread by Mill before publication. Mill's contemporary biographers were certainly surprised about this publication. W. L. Courtney's biography, published in 1889, stated that the essays on religion were 'a painful surprise for his friends' (Courtney 1889, 53). Later, Courtney highlights this mixed reception: 'to some the book came as disappointment, to others as a relief, to all as a surprise' (Courtney 1889, 165). In a very critical essay, John Morley labelled them a 'rather keen surprise' (Morley 1875, 103). And Alexander Bain, one of Mill's closest friends, thought that contemporaries 'were not prepared' for the most controversial thesis found in *Theism*. Apparently, Bain asked Mill's daughter, Helen Taylor, to edit the essays to 'save Mill's reputation' (Packe 1954, 443). Bain ends his account by arguing that although Mill's opponents saw this essay as proof that Mill was 'at bottom a religious man' (Bain 1882, 134), for him 'in everything characteristic of the creed of Christendom, he was a thoroughgoing negationist' (Bain 1882, 140).

In a way, Mill's *Three Essays on Religion* provide extensive commentary on religion, and it is, among Mill's works, the standard reference nowadays on the topic. Yet they were only publicly available after Mill's death. Although *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, published in 1865, serves as a constructive or positive statement on the topic, that is, about the possibility of having a godless and secular religion, it is important to note that it is not an essay

[5] On this important debate on Mill's joint authorship, see, for instance, Hayek (1951) and Packe (1954, 313–15, 371).

devoted to religion as such, but rather an assessment about the French philosopher as a whole. He had also published *On Liberty* in 1859, where we find a defence of religious liberties, but nothing on his own convictions.[6] Thus, Mill's contemporaries did not have much information about his opinions on religion, although people assumed his atheism because of the link with Bentham and his father, James Mill.

Natura

Mill's first essay describes his approach to nature and the natural, and the link between them and ethics. 'Nature' and 'natural', Mill argues, have been misused and are a source of 'false taste, false philosophy, false morality, and even bad law' (CW X, 373). In short, his purpose is to show that nature should not be considered a model for human behaviour and legislation. The criticism about religion comes in when the natural is identified with the creation of God, and therefore goodness and morality. Since *Nature* represents an attack on natural law, the influence of Bentham is also noticeable. But this rejection of metaphysics is also common to Comte's philosophy, in which history would evolve from a metaphysical stage of society into a positivist one. So not only Bentham's, but also Comte's influence should be noted.

The definition of nature points to 'a collective name for all facts, actual and possible'. Nature is a synonym for a reality that can be perceived empirically, it is 'the aggregate of the powers and properties of all things . . . the sum of all phenomena' (CW X, 373). The problem for Mill would be its 'ethical use', the 'absolute identity between what is and what ought to be'. This mistake derives 'from the custom of designating what is, by the expression "laws of nature", while the same word Law is also used, and even more familiarly and emphatically, to express what ought to be' (CW X, 378). An ethical use of nature would imply our acceptance of all aspects of nature, including nature's disorder, injustice, and chaos, to the point of postulating them as a norm (CW X, 384–6). His aim is therefore to overthrow the idea of a providential order; to show that nature, being imperfect, would either be the product of an imperfect creator or not be modelled according to the creator's will at all.

Instead of subordinating and conforming to nature's injustices, and accepting its working as a foundation for morality, humanity should modify,

[6] The reason has to do with trying to avoid the social stigma when disclosing his opinions. His attitude in Parliament, as discussed above, serves as an example. On this point, see Raeder (2002, 239–43).

perfect, and amend nature, thus creating moral systems that underpin proper legislation and fair political institutions. 'Either it is right that we should kill because nature kills; torture because nature tortures; ruin and devastate because nature does the like; or we ought not to consider at all what nature does, but what it is good to do' (CW X, 386). Once again, Mill values human agency, a confidence and optimism consistent with the rest of his work. This approach should also be perceived as a challenge to a religious understanding of the world, since in his view people are entitled to establish a proper morality against God's will as expressed in nature. In Mill's words: 'there was always a tendency . . . to regard any attempt to exercise power over nature, beyond a certain degree, and a certain admitted range, as an impious effort to usurp divine power, and dare more than was permitted to man' (CW X, 381–2). However significant Mill's confidence in humanity is, we should not forget that individuals are part of nature. As such, they will have to overcome their natural instincts and limitations, which is possible thanks to the power of education (on this point, see Raeder 2002, 108–10). Education is in this sense artificial, that is, opposed to nature, but 'this artificially created or at least artificially perfected nature of the best and noblest human beings, is the only nature which it is ever commendable to follow' (CW X, 396).

Mill's confidence in humanity might lead readers to believe that we should completely ditch the notion of religion altogether. After all, justice would be artificial or man-made, rather than natural or divine. But these impressions should be complemented with his remaining two essays, *Utility of Religion* and *Theism*, where both points will be addressed.

Utility of Religion

In this essay, Mill tackles several important questions, which illustrate how utilitarianism is most useful when thinking about both the role and the truth content of religion. The essay aims at answering, first, whether religion is an instrument of 'social good', that is, if religions are particularly useful in preventing and condemning morally questionable actions. He argues that religion works just as well as a secular moral system. When assessing the force and effectiveness of a religion on the one hand, and a secular morality on the other hand, the latter is equally efficient, he argues, in dissuading and penalizing members of society. According to Mill, the social backlash of public opinion and education could be equally as effective as religious moral punishments. In a characteristically optimistic tone, Mill states that 'the power of education is almost boundless' (CW X, 409), and refers to its

role in ancient Greece: 'It was not religion which formed the strength of the Spartan institutions' (CW X, 409).

In fact, when religion has been effective and 'powerful', it was not 'by its intrinsic force, but because it has wielded that additional and more mighty power' (CW X, 411). Mill refers to Bentham here, to strengthen his point that religion has been historically effective in shaping social action because it has been combined with the effect and coercion of public opinion. Mill refers to Bentham's example of oaths to argue that when 'taken in courts of justice', oaths are considered binding because of the effect of public opinion. However, 'university oaths and custom-house oaths' are disregarded, even if these have been enforced by religion, because public opinion is more lax (CW X, 412).

This essay is also interesting because it represents yet another defence of a secular religion. Mill believes that religion could be helpful in order to improve society, but he also claims that religion is not necessary in order to achieve these benefits. On the one hand, he states that 'the value ... of religion to the individual, both in the past and present, as a source of personal satisfaction and of elevated feelings, is not to be disputed' (CW X, 419–20). On the other hand, it is not strictly necessary to go beyond our sensory experience in order to achieve a similar result. A humanist sense of 'unity with mankind, and a deep feeling for the general good' will either perform a similar role or even be an improved form of religion (CW X, 422).

If religions are defined by the fact that they channel feelings towards an idealized external object, Mill suggests that this object should be an abstract concept of humanity, instead of a supernatural entity. In arguing for a Religion of Humanity, he is also providing us with a minimal definition of religion as 'the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as of the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire' (CW X, 422). Humanity and the general improvement of mankind represent these paramount desirable goals.

But unlike belief in the supernatural, the love of humanity has two advantages. It is disinterested (it does not function because of future rewards or sanctions) and does not require us to 'twist' our intellectual faculties or weaken our rational skills (CW X, 423). Mill seems to conclude that religion is of value to the individual, and as such we should not be against religious faith in general. However, a secular religion would work even better for his purposes. According to Mill, we should enlarge our views to achieve a universal morality. Readers could perhaps understand this as a threat to individual liberties. If, according to Mill, we should always aim at the improvement of mankind as a whole, this would surely imply in the future,

at least to some extent, that we should subordinate personal interests and temporary self-regarding satisfactions to a greater goal. But Mill anticipates this objection and suggests a kind of morality that does not imply 'sacrificing the individual to the aggregate nor the aggregate to the individual, but giving to duty on the one hand and to freedom and spontaneity on the other their proper province' (CW X, 421). Mill does not clarify how to achieve this balance and therefore the remark, although well intended, does not seem particularly convincing. Colin Heydt has thrown some light on the subject when he stresses that the task of people would be to embrace and make the narrative of the Religion of Humanity their own (Heydt 2006, 101).

It is clear that Mill viewed religion as a legitimate aspiration and a basic human need. He saw 'belief in a God or Gods, and in a life after death' as a 'canvas which every mind, according to its capacity, covers' (CW X, 419). The reason why people tend to something beyond them is the disappointment and pain of human existence: 'So long as human life is insufficient to satisfy human aspirations, so long there will be a craving for higher things, which finds its most obvious satisfaction in religion. So long as earthly life is full of sufferings, so long there will be need of consolations' (CW X, 420). A way of misreading this fragment would understand this as a defence of religion, but it is crucial to bear in mind the overall argument. Religions have traditionally filled this basic human need, which should be replaced by a Religion of Humanity in the future.

Utility of Religion stands out because it closely illustrates how consequentialism and in particular utilitarian reasoning could be applied to decisions about beliefs and actions. For Mill, religious and secular moralities are not judged according to their principles (which would be closer to deontological ethics), but according to their consequences and role in society. Mill realizes that the consequences of religion are not necessarily negative, and could potentially maximize happiness.

In replying to the question on utility, the veracity of religions could be left aside. Mill aims at understanding 'whether the belief in religion, considered as a mere persuasion, apart from the question of its truth, is really indispensable to the temporal welfare of mankind' (CW X, 405). And the reply is positive: 'It is . . . perfectly conceivable that religion may be morally useful without being intellectually sustainable' (CW X, 405). This does not mean, however, that we should avoid seeking the truth or disregard it. In this sense, Mill would endorse a Religion of Humanity, which does not compromise our intellectual faculties and does not require us to believe in the supernatural. This is a defence of his own secular faith, the Religion of Humanity, that could perhaps be termed a non-religious religion.

Theism

What was controversial about this essay is that it considers religions as valuable because they contain elements of mystery and hope, and presents the existence of God and immortality as weakly probable. He thought that the design argument for God afforded some evidence and that indulging in hope for an afterlife had benefits for some individuals. Understandably, out of the three essays, this was the most controversial, and as some commentators have pointed out, it might result in contradictions when compared with earlier statements on the topic.

One of the most controversial points might be Mill's argument about our impossibility of falsifying that nature is God's design. The only way of judging whether reality is designed by an intelligent being is by looking at 'the work actually produced'. The judging process is difficult and 'unsafe', so we should, Mill suggests, proceed cautiously. When looking at the natural world, the 'vegetable and animal life' and 'the structure of the solar system, seemed to afford evidences, more or less strong, in confirmation of the belief' that it could have been designed by an intelligent being (CW X, 455). For Mill, some parts of the natural world seem to have been created for a purpose, since they seem to fulfil this purpose nicely. Therefore, according to Mill, 'the adaptations in Nature afford a large balance of probability in favour of creation by intelligence' (CW X, 450). Mill also notices that the product of creation, that is, reality, is imperfect, which might have to do with two circumstances: either the poor qualities of the 'substances and forces of which the universe is composed' or else the creator did not know how 'to accomplish his purposes more thoroughly' (CW X, 455). The omnipotence of God is therefore discarded in this way.

Following this line of argument, Mill also attributes benevolence to God, because 'the Creator desired the pleasure of his creatures' (CW X, 457–8). First, because pleasure is a very common experience in human existence, and second, because unlike pleasure, pain seems to interfere with the regular working of natural beings (CW X, 458). This alleged benevolence leads Mill to abstain from denying the immortality of the soul. Although weakly probable, the argument follows, there is some evidence that an intelligent, benevolent mind has created the world. If this is the case, there are no grounds to denying that human consciousness could be prolonged after death. Mill imagines how 'the same thoughts, emotions, volitions and even sensations which we have here, may persist or recommence somewhere else under other conditions' (CW X, 462). This is thus an imaginative exercise, only conceivable as speculation or hope.

Mill believes that there is no scientific basis in order to prove the existence and immortality of the human soul; however, its inexistence does not logically follow from this lack of evidence: 'there is no evidence against the immortality of the soul but that negative evidence, which consists in the absence of evidence in its favour' (CW X, 462). We can neither prove nor disprove the immortality of the soul. That is, for Mill, the impossibility of positively proving the immortality of the soul does not automatically mean that it does not exist.

Readers and commentators have been disappointed when discovering Mill's arguments in *Theism*, considering that they clash with his previous scepticism or defence of a godless religion. It is important to understand that Mill's argument is extremely prudent and cautious. He does not argue for the incontestability of intelligent design. Rather, he is not able to discard this proposition: there is a total absence of evidence either way. By looking at nature, he finds evidence and traces of this design, 'but insufficient for proof, and amounting only to one of the lower degrees of probability' (CW X, 482). Therefore it is not possible to believe in the supernatural, since we do not have grounds for it, but it is not possible to discard it, so we can wish for it: 'the whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of Belief into that of simple Hope' (CW X, 483). This is an important point showing Mill's concern for rigour in logical thinking rather than going too far in admitting the existence of God.

The last part of *Theism* also contains Mill's claim for the conditions under which supernatural hopes and imagination might be 'legitimate and philosophically defensible':

> On these principles it appears to me that the indulgence of hope with regard to the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death, while we recognize as a clear truth that we have no ground for more than a hope, is legitimate and philosophically defensible. The beneficial effect of such a hope is far from trifling. It makes life and human nature a far greater thing to the feelings, and gives greater strength as well as greater solemnity to all the sentiments which are awakened in us by our fellow-creatures and by mankind at large. (CW X, 485)

Against the discouraging feeling that life is short and insignificant, given the lack of conclusive evidence supporting the existence of an afterlife, these kinds of hopes would be beneficial. Mill argues that their benefit lies in giving meaning to human existence, so that they encourage individuals to 'cultivate the improvement of character' (CW X, 485). Irrational hopes, and belief in an afterlife, have a goal: to counteract the

potential feeling of life being pointless and inconsequential. Mill's utilitarian ethics regard these hopes as an indulgence, which is sometimes necessary. Mill considers that the prospect of merely disappearing after death could have a depressing effect, and therefore the possibility of a life after death, although irrational and uncertain, can have a positive effect on character.

Imagining a 'morally perfect Being' and taking this perfection as a 'standard to which to refer and by which to regulate our own characters and lives' (CW X, 486) helps human beings. This seems to contradict the conclusions that Mill reaches in *Utility of Religion*, where he understood a secular religion as superior to regular religions. In *Theism*, as we have seen, he endorses the view that hope in an afterlife might be beneficial, which would be exclusive to religion and not available to those professing a Religion of Humanity. However, it is possible to argue that Mill does not see these supernatural hopes as contradictory to his secular religion. On the contrary, they 'fortify' and help develop a Religion of Humanity. Mill thinks that 'influences of religion on the character . . . will remain after rational criticism has done its utmost against the evidences of religion' (CW X, 487). In other words, the benefits of religious beliefs outweigh the negative consequences like their intellectual indefensibility.

A way of understanding this essay can be found in what Alexander Bain calls Mill's 'long-standing doctrine that every creed is likely to contain some portion of the truth'. I agree with Bain that Mill tries to present what was valuable in religious ideas 'to commend it to the best minds among its adherents' (Bain 1882, 134–5). Bain is referring here to one of Mill's less discussed rhetorical strategies: the way he attempts to combine opposite points of view on a subject to bring out a new understanding of an issue. He read Bentham and Coleridge in this way and presented them as competing counterparts, whose writings contained part of the truth about philosophical issues. During his life, he encountered many instances of this experience: his reading of Platonic dialogues at an early age, his experience with debating societies, and later as a Member of Parliament (López 2016, 31–48).

Reconciling a world of contradictory philosophical and political beliefs was a recurrent approach. L. E. Courtney has also referred to this feature as Mill's 'aim of reconciliation and mediatorship' (Courtney 1889, 173). Mill was certainly an eclectic thinker whose writings take root in a variety of philosophical traditions that appear weaved together. A recurrent theme in his writings was the idea of 'many-sidedness', that is, that there is value in

'building bridges and clearing the paths' that connected two rival schools of thought. He thought of himself as 'superior to most of [his] contemporaries in willingness and ability to learn from everybody' (CW I, 251–3). He appreciates the potential truth in all extreme viewpoints in dispute and aimed at reaching a midway stance. It is possible to read Mill's benevolent tone in *Theism* as another instance of this rhetorical move.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the complexity and breadth of Mill's ideas on religion, while shedding light on the utilitarian and liberal traditions more generally. Mill was a philosopher, politician, and social reformer who absorbed many intellectual influences during his lifetime and left an impressive amount of writings to be analysed. It is possible to regard his life and work as both crystallizing and enriching previous intellectual and philosophical traditions such as empiricism, utilitarianism, and positivism. When it comes to his ideas on religion, these traditions are best understood as intertwined. Mill's views on religion, humanism, and secularism collide with metaphysical, epistemological, and moral questions. Mill's thought needs careful consideration not only because of the mentioned complexity, but also because of potential internal inconsistencies and contradictions. A long-standing defence of a secular and godless Religion of Humanity coexists with a general understanding of religions as valuable imaginative hope, worth preserving for the welfare of society.

This chapter has also examined Mill's writings against the background of his life, personal relationships, and intellectual influences. I have tried to approach the topic in a historically sensitive manner, being respectful of his way of publicly disclosing his opinions on religion, and emphasizing what he said, and when, and what he silenced.

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20

The Physical Sciences

MARTINA KÖLBL-EBERT

'Scientist equals atheist' seems a truism of popular psychology. The average person on the street appears to expect this equation to be true; scientists, people seem to think, are by necessity atheists. If not, it is cause for astonishment and mostly explained away as an exception to the rule. Conservative religious people see a direct causal relationship, fearing that science leads to atheism; fundamentalists 'know' this to be the case, and proponents of the so-called New Atheism agree most fervently (Young 2009).

However, evidence for atheistic scientists in the past is scarce. To the contrary, there are abundant adverse examples of eminent scientists throughout the centuries who were deeply religious and found spiritual depth particularly in their scientific work:

> when with bold Telescopes I survey the Old and Newly discover'd Stars and Planets . . .; and when with excellent Microscopes I discern in otherwise Invisible Objects, the unimitable Subtility of Nature's curious Workmanship; and when . . . by the help of the Anatomical Knives, and the light of Chymical Furnaces, I study the Book of Nature . . . I find myself oftentimes reduc'd to exclame with the Psalmist, *How manifold are thy works, O Lord? in wisdom hast thou made them all!* (Robert Boyle (1627–91), quoted in Gillispie 1959, 3).

René Descartes (1596–1650) was convinced that his scientific enquiry led him to discover laws that God himself had put into the workings of nature, and Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) claimed that his astronomical discoveries allowed him to think 'God's thoughts after Him'. Isaac Newton likewise was a devout Christian who experienced the work of God in the natural laws governing the movements of planets and moons (Brooke 1991, 25, 26, 29). Both Boyle and Newton wrote on theological matter as well as on science, taking both likewise seriously (Gillispie 1959, 4).

For centuries, physical scientists have argued that contrary to our present common expectations, their science led them towards religion and not away from it:

> It is true, that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion. For while the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them, and go no further; but when it beholdeth the chain of them, confederate and linked together, it must needs fly to Providence and Deity. (Bacon 1625)

Astronomer Roger Cotes (1682–1716) saw Newton's scientific work as a sure defence against atheism 'because it enables us to perceive and contemplate the majesty of nature and induces us to worship and revere the Maker and Lord of all things' (Gillispie 1959, 7).

Considering these and numerous other examples, atheism bears no relevance for the Scientific Revolution, as scientists of the early modern period are in no way remarkable for religious dissent. Even Galileo Galilei (1564–1641/2) continued to be an ordinary Catholic, despite his run-in with Church authorities (Edis 2013, 402).

A mechanical worldview as demonstrated in Newton's *Principia* was fascinating for religious believers, because physics and astronomy showed 'how God normally acted'. Natural laws were seen as manifestation of God's will; they, as the term 'law' implied, required a 'law giver' (Brooke 1991, 171–2).

The same was true for the microscopic world. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) saw no anti-religious implications in an atomistic worldview:

> Nay, even that school which is most accused of atheism doth most demonstrate religion; that is, the school of Leucippus, and Democritus, and Epicurus – for it is a thousand times more credible that four mutable elements and one immutable fifth essence, duly and eternally placed, need no God, than that an army of infinite small portions, or seeds unplaced, should have produced this order and beauty without a divine marshal. (Quoted in Brooke 1991, 169)

Historically, atheism developed independently of science, and initially there was little to connect the two. Neither was the emerging science inspired by atheism, nor did it further pre-existing religious doubt (Edis 2013, 403). By the end of the seventeenth century, British theologians, for example, began to worry about increasing materialism in everyday life. However, they did not blame science for this phenomenon, but instead regarded immorality and pride as the origin of disbelief – an attitude that continued well into the early nineteenth century. The Swiss-born chemist, geologist, and physicist Jean

André De Luc (1727–1817), a Calvinist, uttered concern about atheism being caused by an excess of rationalism, but saw particularly science as instrumental for the restoration of Christian faith (Gillispie 1959, 6, 32).

From a British point of view, up to the early nineteenth century, atheism was a French phenomenon – connected with philosophy and politics, not with science (Gillispie 1959, 34).

Physical Scientists and the French Political Atheism

In France, atheism had been a topic of religious concern about a century earlier than in Britain, and in the early seventeenth century, 'the perceived danger posed by atheism becomes almost an obsession', as it was seen to be having a destabilizing effect on the social and political order (Hyman 2010, 5).

Religious alienation among French intellectuals mostly had political roots, and an appeal to science in order to further this political cause was rather uncommon (Brooke 1991, 222); nevertheless, with rising scientific prestige, Enlightenment philosophers 'added science-inspired elements' to their argumentative portfolio (Edis 2013, 404). However, science quickly lost its appeal when the science in question seemed in league with the clerics; consequently, Voltaire (1694–1778) ridiculed contemporary geological research (Lyell 1830, 65–6).

Science, which in France alone was represented by some thirty scientific societies (Brooke 1991, 206), was contrasted to religion by reformers and revolutionaries as the essence of rational thought; and at least some scientists, such as the Swiss mathematician Johann Bernoulli (1667–1748) and the French natural historian Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon (1708–88), insisted on describing nature and natural phenomena without recourse to divine action. They remained, however, a small minority among scientists (Efron 2009, 87). In France, the proportion of scientists joining the anti-religious faction was highest, not because they were scientists, but because French intellectuals in general were suspicious of religion as the guardian of the established social order. British intellectuals, however, were well content with their social order, and religion was seen as a useful agent to stabilize this society (Gillispie 1959, 31).

When Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), a late eighteenth-century British chemist, religious dissenter, and political radical, who campaigned for a superstition-free Unitarianism, travelled to Paris in 1792, he prepared himself for the atheism he expected among his French fellow-philosophers,

and he noted that the French seemed rather surprised at his own religious stance (Gillispie 1959, 34; Brooke 1991, 33).

The British did have their own tradition of religious dissent, which originated in the seventeenth century. Among these, specifically Unitarian and Deist thinking were intellectual positions and often went hand in hand with an interest in science. Plain atheism, however, was associated with political radicalism and thus 'remained marginalized and associated with plebeian unrespectability until the Victorian period' (Nash 2013, 212–13).

Atheism as a Term of Abuse: Geology Between Deism and Natural Theology

Atheism as a denigrating label is old. Already the Greek philosopher Socrates (*c.* 470 to 399 BC) had been denounced and persecuted for godlessness and thus corrupting the youth (Bullivant and Ruse 2013, 4). Much later, Francis Bacon stated: 'The contemplative atheist is rare: a Diagoras, a Bion, a Lucian perhaps, and some others; and yet they seem to be more than they are; for that all that impugn a received religion, or superstition, are by the adverse part branded with the name of atheists' (Bacon 1625).

A reputation for atheism, however unfounded, could have considerable repercussions: Edmond Halley (1656–1741/2) seems to have lost his chair of astronomy due to his reputation for atheism (Brooke 1991, 107–8). Outside the circle of atheist Enlightenment philosophers, a self-reference as atheist remained exceedingly rare among intellectuals until way into the nineteenth century; to be labelled 'atheist' was still perceived as denigrating.

James Hutton (1726–97), a Scottish polymath interested particularly in medicine, chemistry, agriculture, and what was to become geology, may serve as an example. Hutton was a prominent figure of the Scottish Enlightenment and a deeply religious deist (Daiches et al. 1986; Kölbl-Ebert 2004). During the 1780s, he developed his very own *Theory of the Earth*, a literary genre, which gave a narrative of the development of the earth from creation either to the present state or onwards to the end of days. Many of these various theories of the earth were meant as an introductory chapter to a history of humankind, because in the biblical view, human history and earth history were basically contemporary.

Hutton's version, however, is not a narrative starting with the perfect world of creation, which then gets ruined in a linear process punctuated by biblical events. Hutton envisaged also processes capable of regenerating the

earth, leading to a cyclical worldview of indefinite, potentially eternal, duration.

Hutton's spiritual ideas were directed by the conviction that a benevolent God had created the earth as a homestead to humanity. Thus, Hutton shied from interpreting geological change as a consequence of sudden catastrophe. Instead, he interpreted change as solely due to gradual, long-term processes as observable today. This deistic God would not interfere via miracles, but had devised everything from creation in a manner that the living conditions would benefit humankind.

This philosophical-theoretical 'insight' was contradicted by daily observations of soil erosion. The consequences – that is, the progressive destruction of a major prerequisite to human life – were not particularly unsettling, because from the Christian point of view the earth was but a transient feature, maybe just a few thousand years old if one took the Bible literally, and with the end of all things also to be expected in not too distant a future.

Hutton, however, noticed other things as well, such as the fact that a major part of rocks was made up of material that had been produced by the destruction of former rocks. Consequently, there must exist also processes that produce new rocks, which by weathering are transformed into new soils. Thus, wisdom and benevolence of God became obvious in a wonderful rock cycle.

On his journeys, Hutton found clues to the functioning of this 'earth machine'. In geological unconformities, he found evidence for previous earth cycles: rock beds had been elevated and tilted. They had been eroded and then were covered by new beds, which now fell victim to erosion themselves. As 'engine' for consolidating, elevating, and tilting of rock strata he imagined an internal heat, which – as in a steam engine – would provide the necessary force. Hutton also found proof of internal heat. He recognized that granite was not – as commonly assumed – the primordial ground of the earth, crystallized from the biblical primordial waters, but was able to – rising from depths in melted form – intrude into the surrounding rocks.

Hutton saw in the field and in the many hand specimens he collected on his travels the realization of numerous cycles of his earth machine, and so it is no wonder that he felt compelled to state 'that we find no vestige of a beginning, – no prospect of an end' (Hutton 1788, 304).

Hutton was severely chastised by religious authorities due to this perceived eternalism – harking back to pagan Greek philosophies – and they denigrated him as atheist, although his theory was carried by an undeniable, deeply religious, albeit deistic spirituality.

Among those who called Hutton an atheist were also scientists such as De Luc or Richard Kirwan (1733–1812), an Irish chemist and mineralogist (Dean 1992, 68).

Hutton, in reply, denied any eternalist intent and explained that he only saw our ability of measuring the timespan represented in the rock series as limited due to the described cyclic nature of geological processes. Hutton then stressed his religious intentions:

> My principal anxiety . . . was to show how the constitution of this world had been wisely contrived; and this I endeavoured to do, not from supposition or conjecture, but from its answering so effectually the end of its intension, viz. the preserving of animal life, which we cannot doubt of being its purpose. Here, then, is a world that is not eternal, but which has been the effect of wisdom or design. (Hutton, quoted in Dean 1992, 68)

Hutton's friend and biographer John Playfair (1748–1819), a mathematician, geologist, and cleric of the Church of Scotland, reported that Hutton had felt deeply wounded by the injustice of the allegation of impiety and atheism (Gillispie 1959, 75).

A few decades after Hutton's death, Charles Lyell (1797–1875), a geologist especially interested in geological processes, saw to a revival of Hutton's ideas. He regarded Hutton and his followers as

> openly assailed in England, by imputations of the most illiberal kind. We cannot estimate the malevolence of such a persecution, by the pain which similar insinuations might now inflict; for although charges of infidelity and atheism must always be odious, they were injurious in the extreme at that moment of political excitement; and it was better perhaps for a man's good reception in society, that his moral character should have been traduced, than that he should become a mark for these poisoned weapons. (Lyell 1830, 67)

Geology in Oxford

Geology became rapidly popular, especially in the UK, and its concern became the elucidation of earth's history and the processes that shaped the earth. It was this emerging science of geology that around the turn to the nineteenth century began to detach human and earth history from each other by discovering more and more evidence for a much longer, non-human timescale of geological history. This discovery of 'Deep Time', as it has been called, was to provoke a significant change of the contemporary worldview.

In the early nineteenth century, geology became established at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford. William Buckland (1784–1856), an Anglican cleric, became the first professor of geology at Oxford, which was taught as part of physico-theology. Physico-theology flourished in England due to a distinctive character of the English Enlightenment (Brooke 1991, 272):

> Throughout England there were, probably, no communities in which physical science was held in such low esteem as it was in Oxford and Cambridge. Even there, however, geology was the most prominent branch of a generally neglected field of study, and in the first half of the century it was the only science to the advancement of which either university made any significant contribution. (Gillispie 1959, 185)

Opposition to geology, however, came from the High Church and extremist evangelicals alike, as the implications of geology's findings for the understanding of biblical history were widely discussed critically, and the 'value of geology was judged by its congruence with the existing tradition of learning and by its relevance to a clerical education' (Rupke 1983, 15–18); and in this respect, there was considerable doubt:

> In a sermon of 1839, the leader of the Oxford movement, John Henry Newman (1801–90), added his authority to the view that the design argument would only convince those with a pre-existing faith. It is a 'great question,' he declared, 'whether atheism is not as philosophically consistent with the phenomena of the physical world, taken by themselves, as the doctrine of a creative and governing power'. (Brooke 1991, 305)

The critics did not hesitate to equate geologists with infidels and atheists. Again, the term 'atheist' was used to denigrate religious people who happened to believe more liberally than the self-styled defenders of orthodoxy. The clashes of conflicting religious attitudes towards science were intense, as remarked by Buckland's wife and scientific amanuensis:

> Bay [sic] way of encouragement to my husband's labours, we have had the Bampton Lecturer holding forth in St. Mary's against all modern science (of which it need scarcely be said he is profoundly ignorant) but more particularly enlarging on the heresies and infidelities of geologists, denouncing all who assert that the world was not made in six days as obstinate unbelievers &c. &c. We have had two sermons about the Flood concerning which he has a theory, but his hearers cannot justly make out what it is, and we are to have next Sunday a sermon on the universal conflagration by which the earth is to make its exit from among the planets. Alas! my poor husband – Could he be carried back

> a century, fire and faggot would have been his fate, and I daresay our Bampton Lecturer would have thought it his duty to assist at such an 'Auto da Fe'.
> (Letter by Mary Buckland to William Whewell, 12 May 1833; quoted in Rupke 1983, 49).

Consequently, Buckland had to tread softly and was constantly forced to lobby for his science among his fellow theologians. After many centuries of metaphorical ways of reading the Bible, the *sola scriptura* of Protestant Reformation and the availability of the vernacular Bible in combination with a general feeling of Christianity as being 'a religion in danger' (Shehan 2005, 32) had encouraged a retreat on a literalist reading of the Bible, which now dominated the controversy in Britain.

The literal interpretation of *Genesis* proved incompatible with the shift of perception of humanity's place on earth and in its history, which had been induced by the scientific progress in the emerging geosciences. Before, human history and earth history were regarded as basically contemporaneous. Now there was the concept of Deep Time, of independent earth history, which still smacked of eternalism.

Tensions also arose where palaeontologists such as George Cuvier (1769–1832), a Lutheran, proved the extinction of prehistoric species. Apparently, the Chain of Being, linking the creatures of this world to the heavenly spheres, had been severed repeatedly without adverse effect to the divine order of creation.

French ideas of 'evolution' as promoted by Jean Baptiste de Monet Chevalier de Lamarck (1744–1829), Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772–1844), or George Leclerc Comte de Buffon (1707–88) turned the static Chain of Being – which had been used to argue for hierarchical stability in human society as well – into some sort of escalator, where those below eventually would reach the top, an idea considered exceedingly dangerous in the social turmoil of the 1820s and 1830s in Britain:

> So much of geology, – of its science and of its discoveries, – proceeds from the French school, that it is to be feared the malaria of French philosophy has sometimes mildewed the more healthy character of English science.
> (Anonymous pamphlet directed against Buckland's Bridgewater Treatise, quoted in Rupke 1983, 216)

And the more geology progressed, the more there was doubt that the fossil and sedimentological record could be correlated with the biblical narrative. Initially, it was widely assumed that the rock strata had all been deposited in a primordial ocean throughout the first days of the biblical creation myth. It fitted that the deepest and thus oldest strata were devoid of fossils and that in

the younger rocks marine fossils were now found on dry land. Apart from James Hutton, Charles Lyell, and their followers, it was widely assumed that the action of water was vastly insufficient to carve out the valleys, which often contained only small rivers and brooks or sometimes even were completely dry (Kölbl-Ebert 2009a).

A spectacular catastrophe was envisaged to account for valleys and the numerous bones of seemingly tropical animals that were found among the boulders and gravels and which were too big to be transported by the present rivers. They were all attributed to some kind of mega-tsunami that swept the continents. The event was often correlated with the biblical Deluge, a theory that was gratefully adopted by Christian apologetics in their fight against Enlightenment anticlericalism and atheism, as it seemed to prove the action of God. But progress in geological research soon began to change this simple working hypothesis. Intercalated in marine rock strata were terrestrial ones, thus precluding the idea of a primordial ocean, which slowly but steadily receded. Unconformities as described by Hutton, evidence for reworked strata, confirmed that earth history was far from following a simple linear trend. There were no human remains in all these older strata, but there was ample evidence that animals had died before any human had had the chance for a first sin. Carnivory was not something that appeared after the first humans had been expelled from Paradise, but that existed long before there was any evidence for human presence.

There was clear evidence, it turned out, that the seemingly tropical animals of the youngest strata had not been swept in by a devastating flood but that they had actually lived right there on the spot. In the 1840s, it was discovered that the gravels and boulder beds themselves were not transported by water but by glacier action. What had been interpreted as witness to the Deluge was now interpreted as remains of an ice age. The large-scale correlation of rock formations with the biblical chronology was in full retreat; the Deluge was reduced to something for which there was no longer any evidence in the fossil record.

Thus, biblical literalism came under increasing pressure, especially since it had become customary in the UK to rely on geology for apologetic purposes. Nevertheless, there was still a strong feeling of the usefulness of geology as a tool of physico-theology to prove the existence of divine design in nature as a way of refuting atheism (Rupke 1983, 233). It remained so until Charles Darwin (1809–82) showed that 'design' did not need 'divine providence', but was explicable by ordinary natural processes.

> Natural theology was a decidedly pluralistic cultural phenomenon. The only common denominator among its advocates was opposition to atheism . . . At Oxford and Cambridge it formed a guise under which science claimed the right to an academic niche. . . . It has been said that English geology contributed so substantially to the literature on natural theology in order to show that it did not have an inherent tendency toward irreligious or philosophical scepticism. The traditional, self-professed purpose of geology in its role of natural theology was indeed to refute atheism and other forms of irreligious belief . . . Geology in its guise of natural theology did function as a form of religious apologetics in opposition to atheism, but the primary reason why English geology contributed so explicitly and substantially to the argument from design was its Oxbridge habitat . . . Very few prominent geologists on the Continent or in Scotland, irrespective of their religious commitment, contributed to the literature on natural theology. The English school was unique in emphasizing rocks and fossils as a basis for the argument from design. (Rupke 1983, 234–5)

Clerics among the geologists saw no problem in living both their faith and their scientific interests. They felt, however, the need for apologetics when addressing the general public; but contrary to our present, it was not the religious part that needed defending. This becomes apparent from Buckland's Bridgewater Treatise.

The Bridgewater Treatises

Whereas William Whewell (1794–1866) chose to arrange his Bridgewater Treatise on astronomy and general physics in a manner that he presented as a general science book, which he then reviewed in a last chapter under religious considerations almost as an afterthought, Buckland mixed the design argument throughout his whole treatise. He confessed 'that many learned and religious men' regarded the study of natural phenomena 'with jealousy and suspicion', a problem which he attributed to geology's findings 'respecting the lapse of very long periods of time, before the creation of man', which – and here he referred to the charge of eternalism and thus atheism – made minds

> which have been long accustomed to date the origin of the universe, as well as that of the human race, from an era of about six thousand years ago, receive reluctantly any information, which if true, demands some new modification of their present ideas of cosmogony; and, as in this respect, Geology has shared the fate of other infant sciences, in being for a while considered hostile to revealed religion. (Buckland 1836, 8–9)

As to the concrete problem of reconciling geology with the biblical creation myths, Buckland demanded 'some little concession from the literal interpreter of scripture' (Buckland 1836, 14), and argued for a 'gap-theory' – that is, squashing nearly the whole of earth's history into a narrative gap between the first two verses of *Genesis*, which basically allowed Buckland to detach geology near completely from the biblical order of events (Buckland 1836, 16).

Buckland repeatedly stressed the efficiency of geology in finding evidence of design, which made it a suitable tool to fight atheism and polytheism alike. Thus, geology was a valuable helpmate to physico-theology. Unfortunately for Buckland, the extremely pious were not convinced. William Cockburn (1773–1858), the Dean of York, issued a series of pamphlets against Buckland and other geologists in which he strongly objected to the notion of a long earth history before the advent of human beings; he also crusaded against the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), where the geology section was the most popular (Rupke 1983, 216):

> Geologists had excited public attention and had shocked the Clergy and the Saints by proving beyond a doubt, that the seven days of creation is an eastern myth for enormous geological periods, nevertheless the contest was even more keen than it is at the present time with the pre-adamites. It lasted long too for after I had published my work on Physical geography [1848] I was preached against by name in York Cathedral. Our friend Dr Buckland committed himself by taking the Clerical View in his Bridgewater Treatise but facts are such stubborn things that he was obliged to join the geologists at last.
>
> (First draft of Mary Somerville's autobiography, 112–13; Bodleian Library: Somerville Collection Dep. c355 MSALL-2)

Buckland's Cambridge colleague was Adam Sedgwick (1785–1873), likewise an Anglican cleric with a somewhat more conservative touch compared to Buckland. Nevertheless, he stated in a published sermon delivered in 1832 at Trinity College: 'But if the Bible be a rule of life and faith – a record of our moral destinies – it is not (I repeat), nor does it pretend to be, a revelation of natural science', and in the following he argued against any attempt 'to bring the natural history of the earth into a literal accordance with the book of Genesis', which he regarded as an impossible task (Sedgwick quoted in Roberts 2009, 159–60). Like Buckland, Sedgwick preferred the gap-theory, and like Buckland and other, non-clerical fellow-geologists, he had to endure denigrating attacks from Cockburn and other biblical literalists.

The resistance against geology continued into the mid-1850s, but with lessening intensity (Roberts 2009, 160–5). 'However, all this fuss and bother about geology and Genesis remained almost exclusively confined to Britain and the

United States . . . In the early 19th century the issue of geology and Genesis was little more than a storm in an Anglo-American tea-cup' (Rudwick 2014, 159–61).

In Britain, it was the largely unprofessionalized culture of science which kept theology in close contact with science. At the BAAS meetings between 1831 and 1865, forty-one Anglican clerics actively chaired sessions; from 1866 to 1900 there were only three (Brooke 1991, 67). This 'erosion' reflects the onsetting professionalization of science in the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain and the resulting dissociation from physico-theology.

Repeated exposure to anti-scientific censures from conservative quarters in theology, despite the efforts for reconciliation that were undertaken by the geologists, certainly also led to a certain fatigue concerning the topic at large. Lyell argued that 'clerical geologists should not try to do two jobs at once' and he deliberately attempted 'to exclude biblical preconceptions from geological reasoning', depending 'on none other than known natural causes' (Brooke 1991, 229). He became convinced 'that geology would only become a science when it disentangled itself from biblical precepts, narrowed its scope to the reconstruction of the past in terms of forces known in the present, and deliberately excluded speculation about origins, purposes, and ultimate meanings'. These 'were questions that lay beyond the purview of current science. To admit them would be to reintroduce metaphysical and theological issues alien to the quest for positive scientific knowledge' (Brooke 1991, 375).

Prolonged resistance and negligence from theological quarters could lead to open resistance from scientists. Whether, however, this meant that the scientist in question was actually an atheist, remains unclear:

> Provoked by the refusal of Roman Catholic authorities in Ireland to heed a request from their own laity that the physical science be made part of a Catholic university curriculum, John Tyndall [1820–93] took advantage of his presidential address to the Belfast meeting of the British Association (1874) to launch an offensive . . . Men of science, he declared, shall wrest from theology the entire domain of cosmological theory. (Brooke 1991, 412)

Physics and astronomy were less in the limelight during the formative years of geology, but potentially subversive astronomical theories were arriving from France nevertheless – a subject the physicist and philosopher of science William Whewell had to deal with when he wrote the Bridgewater Treatise on astronomy and general physics. He saw in God the 'author of the laws of material nature', and in science a tool for informed admiration of God's handiwork (Whewell 1834, 251).

Whewell also strongly warned against a sterile physico-theology because he believed that it was impossible to prove the existence of God from observing nature. He went on to quote the mathematician, physicist, and Catholic theologian Blaise Pascal (1623–62): 'I do not undertake to prove this . . . not only because I do not feel myself sufficiently strong to find in nature that which shall convince obstinate atheists, but because such knowledge without Jesus Christ is useless and sterile' (Whewell 1834, 317–18), thus opting for a more spiritual rather than a rational approach to religion.

Any perceived problem between physics and religion, however, so Whewell explained, was due to more mathematically minded people such as the mathematicians or theoretical physicists Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert (1717–83), Alexis Claude Clairaut (1713–65), Leonhard Euler (1707–83), Joseph Louis Comte de Lagrange (1736–1813), and Pierre-Simon de Laplace (1749–1827) – all French with the exception of Euler – who reduced the wonders of the world to abstract laws and models and thus showed no interest in religion or even called themselves atheists (Whewell 1834, 328–9). But even these 'confused', deductive thinkers, Whewell consoled his readers, added to a higher scientific good (Whewell 1834, 333–4). It is only the inductive researchers, who will be able to see the divine wonders of creation in their scientific endeavours, but both induction and deduction form an integral part of science (Whewell 1834, 335–47).

Laplace, 'one of the greatest mathematicians of modern time' (Whewell 1834, 348), required special treatment, because of his well-known atheist stance. Laplace had expressed

> his conviction that the supposed evidence of final causes will disappear as our knowledge advances, and that they only seem to exist in those cases where our ignorance leaves room for such a mistake. 'Let us run over,' he says, 'the history of the progress of the human mind and its errors: we shall perpetually see final causes pushed away to the bounds of its knowledge. These causes . . . are, therefore, in the eyes of the philosopher nothing more than the expression of the ignorance in which we are of the real causes.' (Whewell 1834, 348–9)

Whewell seemed to agree with Laplace that nobody could expect science and specifically physics to prove God's action in the universe (Whewell 1834, 356), but he drew no atheist conclusion from it. His spirituality saw science as a tool to increase or inform the sensation of awe and amazement; it was, however, not needed to induce spirituality in the first place.

Already Pascal had warned against the argument from design:

> because to neglect the person of Christ in dialogues with the atheist was to neglect the one mediator between God and humanity. It is ironic that attempts to establish God's existence should encourage atheism, but there is a sense in which Pascal's prophecy came true. There is an old adage that no one had doubted the existence of God until the Boyle lecturers undertook to prove it! . . . The problem for Christian apologists was this: In seeking to capitalize on the most accessible proof of God's existence, and one having the authority of the sciences behind it, they came close to saying that what they meant by God was the craftsman, the mechanic, the architect, the supreme contriver behind nature's contrivances. From this to atheism could be one short step. It only required an alternative metaphysics in which the appearance of design could be dismissed as illusory . . . If the only proof came from design, one was left with nothing on its collapse.
>
> The point is not that science undermined the design argument – certainly not in the eighteenth century. Quite the contrary. It was rather that religious apologists were asking too much of it. A religious burden was placed on the sciences, which they were eventually unable to carry. (Brooke 1991, 264)

The commonly perceived clash between science and religion – a discussion which after Darwin published his *Origin of Species* in 1859 was handed over to the life sciences – is not about science leading to atheism; rather, it was always a debate about worldview issues: religion using established worldviews to interpret spiritual experience and to make sense of tradition; and scientific progress constantly forcing people to revise their worldviews, thus demanding a flexibility that religious conservatives find hard to embrace. However, 'there is no reason to think full-blown atheism among late nineteenth-century thinkers was anything but a small minority position. Nevertheless, there was a sense that atheism had arrived, and that this arrival owed something to science' (Edis 2013, 406).

Theological Backdrop

Within the last 500 years we have moved in Europe from a society in which atheism was basically unknown to one in which unbelief seems perfectly normal, maybe even the dominant view (Hyman 2010, 2). The historian of theology, Gavin Hyman (2010), sees the fault in theology and philosophy itself, with the development of science acting as backdrop to the enfolding history: in short, with the abandonment of medieval theology, represented by Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), which allowed for God to remain a mystery, in favour of a faith dominated by rationalism, God became 'an "object of thought" (rather than the source of all thought)' (Hyman 2010, xvii), whereas

Thomas Aquinas had considered language – intended to refer to creatures – as by definition inadequate to be applied to the Creator (Hyman 2010, 50).

By removing the speculative and mysterious from faith, the relationship between God and believer began to change as a consequence. According to Hyman, there were basically two distinct ways this happened: 'God must either be brought immediately before our eyes in a particularly vivid, personalized way, or else recedes away beyond the sights of the epistemological horizon altogether' (Hyman 2010, 62). Modern atheism seems to be a direct reaction to this change in theological perception. The 'anthropomorphic conception of God' makes it 'vulnerable to the charges of "projection"' (Hyman 2010, 62), and in the second conception God 'is in danger of dissolving into nothingness' (Hyman 2010, 64).

> Nineteenth-century historians are generally agreed that there were three developments in particular that were perceived as contributing to the decline of religious belief and the growth of atheism and agnosticism . . . moral considerations, scientific discoveries and biblical criticism were damaging to theism, *precisely because of* the modern Enlightenment form of theism that was then dominant . . . Had theism not taken this distinctively modern turn, it is unlikely that these three factors would have been so damaging to theism as in fact they were. (Hyman 2010, 82)

> [T]he Bible came to be interpreted in an increasingly historical, scientific and mathematical way . . . Christians believed the Bible to be 'true', and to the modern mind a true narrative was one that described events that had actually happened in an historical sense. It occurred to few that such an understanding of what it meant for a text to be true was actually of relatively recent origin. In fact, it represented a striking departure from earlier understandings, most notably those of the Early Church fathers. (Hyman 2010, 85)

Religion now seemed to 'stand or fall on the literal truth of its scriptural texts' (Hyman 2010, 91). The simple solutions were either religious fundamentalism or atheism. Thus, especially scientifically educated people were alienated from faith. If they did not find it in them to return to a spiritual faith, they drifted into atheism (Hyman 2010, 94). And thus, '[a]t some point in history, a seed was planted from which would sprout an indelible mental connection between "atheism" and "science" . . . it both made its appearance and also reached its zenith in the second half of the nineteenth century' (Hyman 2010, 101).

As we have seen, geology (and later the debate on evolution) have been crucial in this development. Having first supported a literal or at least

concordant reading of the Bible via physico-theology, this kind of theology dissolved when scientific progress detached earth history from the biblical narrative, leaving a void in which many, who had relied on rational proof rather than on personal spirituality, lost their faith.

> We can thus say that science did indeed present a challenge to religion, but it is the nature of this challenge that has often been misunderstood . . . Science was right to think that theology was trespassing on its domain, but this was because theology had abandoned and evacuated its own distinctive and proper domain. (Hyman 2010, 119)

By the mid-twentieth century, theologians increasingly accepted 'that religion and science are not directly competitive "explanations" of the same things', from whence they proceeded with more or less successful 'attempts to free theology itself from its modern legacy' (Hyman 2010, 119).

Physical Sciences and Creationism

A notable and influential exception to this consensus of modern Christian theology are the fundamentalists, with their so-called 'scientific creationism' and the 'intelligent design' movement. Their vocal attack on modern science has been widely distributed in mass media as well as across social networks. Consequently, it tends to dominantly contribute to the image of religion for those people who – either indifferent to religious belief or professing atheism – have no easy access to modern theology. The problem that, in a largely secular society, religion is often associated and equated with an aggressive creationism – however unfounded this particular accusation may be with respect to the mainstream churches – is often ignored or underestimated by theologians and clerics alike, leading to inadequate response.

Whereas theologians see the problem of evil and suffering as a theological challenge and driving force of atheism (Hyman 2010, 123), scientists quite often feel themselves under attack from religious fundamentalists who publicly and aggressively denigrate their expertise. Theologians, on the other hand, seem perplexed by the insistence of contemporary atheists that science and religion exclude each other, because they feel that this problem has long been solved (Hyman 2010, 183–5).

Apart from atheism or agnosticism, and while there may still remain the more traditional theistic approaches as well, the twentieth century has seen the development of various forms of faith among physical

scientists. They quite often deny a 'personal God', if only because this theological term so often is collapsed into the image of the 'old man with a beard' of folk religion. They also argue more from personal spiritual experience and not from church dogmatism. Albert Einstein (1879–1955), for example,

> repeatedly allied himself with [Baruch de] Spinoza's (1632–1677) religious outlook, which he interpreted as presenting a pantheistic God completely lacking in personality or will and manifest only in the orderly nature of the cosmos . . .
>
> As unusual as Einstein's conception of religion was, he took it seriously. Lacking an inspirational God, he grounded his religiosity on [a] . . . cosmic religious feeling. This was a state in which the 'individual feels the futility of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvellous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought'. Einstein said this was what truly religious people moved on to after discarding a personal God. This 'rapturous amazement' at the mysterious order of the universe was also the 'guiding principle' of the work of scientists. Faith, then, was critical to the advancement of science. But it was faith in rationality, not divine intervention . . .
>
> We can now understand why Einstein called himself religious. Indeed, he did not care for atheism and bristled at the suggestion that scientists naturally fell into that camp. When sent an atheistic book, he protested that the arguments in it applied only to a personal God. (Stanley 2009, 192–3)

Physical Sciences and the New Atheism of the Twenty-First Century

Scientists at present seem to be somewhat more likely to disbelieve in God than non-scientists, and within the scientific community the life sciences seem to be more likely to harbour atheists than the physical sciences. However, religious beliefs frequently seem to be set already at an age before entering university, during high school or college education. Consequently, science does not seem to be the cause of disbelief; rather, non-believers tend to study science more frequently. 'Thus, the best predictor of . . . scientists' religious practice is the scientists' childhood religious practice' (Young 2009).

Consequently, 'a certain consensus exists [among theologians] on the fact that science does not have to be considered a factor in the growth in atheism, nor is the activity of the scientist synonymous with postulatory atheism'.

Theologians perceive only a certain 'temptation' in science to be 'more vulnerable to the attraction of materialism' due to the study of material nature, and to push science 'to coining models that pretend to exhaustively represent the entire reality', the discussion of which, however, 'favored religious questions to rise again in our culture, and without necessarily responding to them in an atheistic fashion' (Mura 2005).

An ad hoc survey among scientific colleagues without religious affiliation – ranging from disinterestedness in the topic to professed atheism – revealed a rather small bundle of reasons for their philosophy, which seems to be consistent with more sophisticated studies (cf. Brown 2013, 237–40). Among the simply disinterested are a large proportion of younger colleagues whose parents already had no religious affiliation, and who consequently were never socialized in a religious faith. The others, who actively withdrew from a childhood faith and are more likely to understand themselves as more or less vocal atheists, name as reasons bad experiences with their church – from discrimination of women and sexual abuse scandals to personal run-ins with individual clerics – personal tragedies, which led them to disbelief in a benevolent God, and incompatibility of science with religion, which they seem to know only in its fundamentalist – mainly creationist – form.

Scientifically motivated atheism, as evolving since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mainly as a reaction to the attack by Christian fundamentalists against the theory of evolution or geological time, perceives religion mainly as a contradiction of reason and strives for the emancipation of science from religious authority (LeDrew 2016, 32–3). These atheists agree with their opponents in fundamentalist religious quarters that science and religion are incompatible. Largely restricted to the United States as it was throughout the twentieth century, it returned to Europe in the early years of the twenty-first century, in the form of the so-called New Atheism (LeDrew 2016, 37). It seems to have been provoked by increasing activity in creationism and associated Christian fundamentalism in the build-up towards the Darwin Year of 2009. Scientists, particularly in Europe, have been taken unawares, since before young-earth creationism had been restricted to the religious fringes and had not been taken seriously. It suddenly received wide media coverage and infiltrated politics, and in 2005 Cardinal Schönborn's infamous interview in the *New York Times* seemed to endorse Intelligent Design (Schönborn 2005). Suddenly, European creationists had mutated from easily ignored, harmless lunatics handing out pamphlets on street corners, to a dangerous threat to reason, ready to infiltrate the church mainstream as well as schools and the mass media – and they were equipped with an

astonishingly effective rhetoric strategy. An outcry from scientists followed the interview, and creationism was finally on the European agenda. A phalanx of scientists rallied to defend reason and scientific integrity against fundamentalism, some rapidly radicalizing into a most fervent atheism, with the biologist Richard Dawkins as their most outspoken representative. The reaction seems understandable if one knows religion only in its fundamentalist form. However, it quickly alienated the mainstream churches, who perceived this New Atheism as an unfounded attack by science on religion in general, without being aware of the underlying causes. The topic was present everywhere between about 2005 and 2010, quickly subsiding again after the Darwin Year 2009 had come and gone (Kölbl-Ebert 2009b, 2013).

Due to the close connection to the Darwin Year, New Atheism is more prominent among biologists than physical scientists. Nevertheless, there are topics such as old earth or cosmological issues, where the physical sciences are called upon as well. Most scientists, however, seem to refrain from joining the rank and file of the New Atheists. Even if they are atheist themselves, they do not want to be bothered with this topic, which seems far removed from their daily life in a secular society. In fact, religious indifference seems to be the most common attitude in western society among physical scientists as well as in the general populace (Bauer 2018, 38).

Interestingly, however, scientists – whether atheists or not – widely acknowledge the need to quite practically address metaphysical questions in addition to scientific ones, specifically when codes of professional ethics are discussed, thus developing a secular ethics, which transcends the boundaries of science. The geosciences, for example, support a thriving geoethics association (www.geoethics.org), where responsibilities for sustainability are discussed, drawing together expertise in mineral and energy resources, response to geohazards, environmental protection, and climate research. Such topics require scientists who are competent in philosophical issues as well, not to improve their ability to act as a moral authority in lieu of religious authorities, but to be able to define the limits of their expertise and to distinguish between the various levels of understanding and argument, thus inviting society to share responsibility (Kölbl-Ebert 2019). The most recent example of such meta-scientific engagement with the public are the Scientists for Future and their moral as well as scientific support of the Fridays for Future movement. Theologians tend to find such moral commitment of scientists so strange that they openly marvel at the respect with which these scientists address nature and how much respect they pay to these moral questions (Naab 2018, 55): ‘A “pious

atheism" is shown, which preserves piety, where it had been directed in shallow simplification exclusively to a "God", who as "totally Other" has been torn from all context of being and beings' (Naab 2018, 55; translated from German).

Conclusions

Over the past centuries, many – if not most – physical scientists have shown a sincere religious commitment. Nevertheless, a significant number of them, the proportion certainly increasing with time, have shown a religious orientation, which 'has often been unorthodox when judged against the norms of their day . . . eminent scientific figures have rarely been typical representatives of the religious traditions in which they were nurtured' (Brooke 1991, 60).

This said, we historically met atheism among the physical sciences in a variety of roles:

- As an unfounded reproach intended to disqualify the 'differently religious' and/or to attack scientific results, which did not conform with a literalist reading of religious texts, and which thus were perceived as threat against orthodoxy.
- In the form of a politically motivated atheism especially in eighteenth-century France, where some scientists supported anticlerical Enlightenment philosophers for philosophical reasons rather than scientific ones. Here, the connection of science and atheism was not a causal one.
- Most recently as New Atheism – that is, as a reaction against attacks from fundamentalists against the theory of evolution, the old earth of geologists, and progress in astronomy and cosmogony since the early twentieth century.

Otherwise, there is a prevalence of growing religious indifference in a secular society, which is not specifically science-motivated, but a phenomenon of general society, especially in Europe, after traditional Church authority has eroded away due to inner-religious factors.

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21

Charles Darwin and the Darwinians

BERNARD LIGHTMAN

In 1879, Darwin wrote to John Fordyce, a Scottish-born congregationalist minister and author, who had asked about the state of the evolutionist's religious beliefs. Darwin wrote that his judgement often fluctuated. 'In my most extreme fluctuations', Darwin told Fordyce, 'I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. – I think that generally (and more and more so as I grow older) but not always, that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind' (Darwin Correspondence Project, Letter no. 12041). Since this was just three years before Darwin's death, this can be taken as a fairly definitive statement of his mature views. Darwin, and many of the Darwinians who supported his evolutionary theory, depicted themselves as agnostics. But both critics on their right and on their left accused them of trying to use agnosticism as a disguise for their true position: materialistic atheism. In 1872, Darwin wrote to the Catholic biologist St. George Jackson Mivart that he was accustomed to denunciations of atheism from Christian opponents, as well as 'to covert sneers of all kinds' (Darwin Correspondence Project, Letter no. 8149). Vladimir Lenin, the Russian Marxist, later insisted in his *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (1908) that Darwin's bulldog, the biologist T. H. Huxley, used agnosticism 'as a fig-leaf for materialism' (Lenin [1908] 1970, 195). Materialistic atheism, Lenin's quip implied, was widely seen as shameful by the strait-laced Victorians – as something to be covered up like one's genitals. Did Darwin's contemporaries agree that there was no distinction between atheism and agnosticism? How much of a problem was it for the agnostic Darwinians to be labelled as atheists? How did they respond to accusations of atheism? To answer these questions, I will be dealing in this chapter primarily with Darwin, Huxley, the philosopher of evolution Herbert Spencer, philosopher, critic, and biographer Leslie Stephen, professor of natural philosophy at the Royal Institution John Tyndall, and W. K. Clifford, professor of applied mathematics at University College, London.

All of these men were part of a group of intellectuals who became important in Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century, in part due to their vigorous defense of Darwin. This group, referred to by historians as the scientific naturalists, pushed to reform science and to make it more central to British culture and society. Scientific naturalists put forward new interpretations of nature, society, and humanity derived from the theories, methods, and categories of empirical science. They were naturalistic in the sense that they ruled out recourse to causes not present in empirically observed nature and they were scientific in that they interpreted nature in accordance with three major mid-century scientific theories: the atomic theory of matter, the conservation of energy, and evolution. In addition to Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Stephen, Tyndall, and Clifford, the leading scientific naturalists included the biologist E. Ray Lankester, founder of eugenics Francis Galton, statistician Karl Pearson, anthropologist Edward Tylor, doctor Henry Maudsley, and a group of journalists, editors, and writers, including G. H. Lewes, John Morley, Grant Allen, and Edward Clodd. These were the men who were engaged in a contest for cultural authority with the Anglican clergy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Whereas early Victorian scientists like William Whewell and John Herschel were products of Cambridge University, an Anglican institution that was saturated with the ethos of natural theology, the scientific naturalists (with some exceptions) came from outside of the Oxbridge system and they wanted to secularize science. They not only claimed to have scientific authority, they also attempted to parlay their scientific authority into cultural authority. That is, they demanded the right to be considered experts on social, political, and even religious issues by virtue of their scientific knowledge. They insisted that only they had special insights into how to interpret the broader metaphysical significance of modern science, not Christian theologians. Many of the scientific naturalists adopted agnosticism as a useful weapon in their contest with Christian theologians.

Challenging the powerful Anglican Church in mid-nineteenth-century Britain was no easy task. The scientific naturalists had to be careful what they said in public, whether it be in the periodical press or before audiences for their lectures. Their opponents could seize upon anything they said to link scientific naturalism with materialism, which had a long association with moral corruption and debauchery. Starting in the late 1860s, one effective strategy for damaging the respectability of scientific naturalism was to link it with the supposed immorality of avant-garde art and literature, in particular Aestheticism. In their arguments that Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871) had transgressed Victorian standards of respectability, his critics

connected him to Algernon Swinburne, for them a notorious poet of the Aesthetic Movement. Darwin's book became increasingly implicated with Swinburne's political radicalism, aesthetic sensualism, and flagrant sexual depravity. Some detractors complained that Darwin's seeming obsession with sex in the *Descent* made it suitable reading material for only the worldliest gentlemen. These attempts to connect Darwin with immorality became significant obstacles to establishing the naturalistic worldview as a morally acceptable alternative to the Christian one. Darwin altered his *Descent* to avoid any hint of indecency, and Tyndall and Clifford were also forced to change portions of their writings for similar reasons. If they wanted to be considered as members of the intellectual elite, the scientific naturalists had no choice but to construct their model of professional scientific authority in line with their opponents' standards of respectability (Dawson 2007).

Materialism was often associated intimately with atheism in nineteenth-century Britain (Lightman 2015). It is therefore not surprising that charges of atheism became another problem for the scientific naturalists and their fight to protect a public image of respectability. In an 1872 article on 'Theism, atheism, and the problem of evil', the abolitionist and freethinker Moncure Conway declared that 'atheism is still a term of social terror' (Conway 1872, 22). Atheism was widely considered to be a threat to the fabric of Victorian society, and under blasphemy laws could be prosecuted. During the nineteenth century, a number of working-class atheists who published radical periodicals spent time in prison for the crime of blasphemy. The scientific naturalists had to tread carefully when they wrote about controversial religious issues. Every word they published was closely scrutinized by their enemies. In 1873, an American journal, *Scribner's Monthly*, carried an article on 'Modern skepticism', referring to Darwin, Huxley, Tyndall, and Spencer as part of a group of 'anti-Christian scientific leaders of transatlantic thought' (Blauvelt 1873, 430). When Tyndall and Huxley corresponded about the piece, Huxley pointed out that Tyndall and Spencer were the main targets. '*I* come in only *par parenthèse*', Huxley joked, 'and I am glad to see that people are beginning to understand my real position and to separate me from such raging infidels as you and Spencer' (Huxley 1903, II, 118). But it was no laughing matter. Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) had been greeted with fury and anger when it was first published. The botanist Asa Gray, one of Darwin's allies, reported in 1860 that the eminent Swiss-American biologist and geologist Louis Agassiz publicly denounced it as atheism (Darwin Correspondence Project, Letter no. 2653A).

The scientific naturalists did not see themselves as atheists; nor did they view themselves as anti-religious. Many of them honestly believed that religion served an important purpose in human life. They revealed their religious nature even when they were attacking the Christianity of their time. They genuinely saw themselves as trying to rescue true religion from the clutches of stultifying institutions and their arrogant theologians. They denied that science, as they defined it, was necessarily at odds with authentic religion. Science and religion, if rightly conceived, could never come into conflict because each realm was distinct and without authority outside its proper sphere of interest. Whereas science dealt with the realm of knowledge, true religion fell within the world of feeling, emotion, imagination, inwardness, and symbol. Huxley affirmed in 1859 that 'true science and religion are twin-sisters, and the separation of either from the other is sure to provide the death of both. Science prospers exactly in proportion as it is religious; and religion flourishes in exact proportion to the scientific depth and firmness of its basis' (Huxley 1859, 35). However, theology, distinct from religion and operating in the world of intellect because of its claims to embody religious feelings in concrete facts, was potentially in conflict with science. Science and religion clashed only if religion was wrongly identified with theology (Lightman 1987, 119–34). Since religion had value in their eyes, Huxley and his allies sincerely believed that they were not guilty of the charge of atheism.

The scientific naturalists adopted two strategies to counter accusations that they were atheists. First, they simply denied that they were atheists, both publicly and privately. In 1870 Tyndall declared in a public lecture that evolutionists 'have as little fellowship with the atheist who says there is no God, as with the theist who professes to know the mind of God' (Tyndall 1892, II, 134). After he delivered his controversial 'Belfast Address' at the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1874, Tyndall had an even more difficult time persuading his friends, let alone his enemies, that he rejected atheism. In a private letter to a friend written on 7 September 1874, shortly after he had delivered the address, he described his frustration: 'The people that raise this uncandid outcry are not worthy of contradiction', he wrote. 'They would roast me, but the time of roasting is happily gone by. You *are* correct in saying that *I am not an Atheist'* (Tyndall 1874, 3413). In his essay 'An Agnostic's Apology' (1876), Leslie Stephen identified himself as an agnostic and distanced himself from atheism, declaring that 'dogmatic atheism – the doctrine that there is a no God, whatever may be meant by God – is, to say the least, a rare phase of opinion' (Stephen 1903, 1).

The scientific naturalists used a second tactic to ward off damaging accusations of atheism. The invention of the label 'agnostic' was itself an important strategy. Huxley coined the term 'agnosticism' in 1869. The circumstances surrounding his creation of a new word are illuminating. Huxley had been attending the early meetings of the newly formed Metaphysical Society when it struck him that his religious position didn't have a name. A debating club, the members of the Metaphysical Society met from 1869 to 1880. These debaters came from every sphere of intellectual endeavour. To name but a few, William Gladstone, John Morley, and Arthur James Balfour were among the Society's political figures. The men of science included Huxley, Tyndall, Henry Acland, G. Croom Robertson, J. J. Sylvester, Clifford, and St. George Mivart. Religion had its defenders: the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Henry Edward Manning; the Catholic theologian, Father J. D. Dalgairns; liberal Anglicans Frederick Denison Maurice and Arthur Stanley; the Bishop of Peterborough, William Connor Magee; the Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol, C. J. Ellicott; and the Unitarian reverend James Martineau. Philosophers included Henry Sidgwick, Shadworth Hodgson, and Mathew Boulton. There were also literary lights such as Alfred Tennyson, James Anthony Froude, the positivist Frederic Harrison, John Ruskin, Leslie Stephen, Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, Walter Bagehot, James Knowles, Richard Holt Hutton, and many more. The roster of members includes many of the English intellectual superstars of the period.

Looking back on his participation in the Society, Huxley remarked that 'every variety of philosophical and theological opinion was represented there and expressed itself with entire openness'. He also recalled that in the company of his illustrious Metaphysical Society colleagues that he began to feel embarrassed that he had no definite term to describe his distinctive philosophical and theological position other than the rather vague term 'freethinker'. He rejected atheist, theist, pantheist, materialist, idealist, and Christian because those who were known by these names 'were quite sure that they had attained a certain "gnosis," – had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence, while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble'. Challenged and attacked by the best minds in Victorian England, most of whom were '-ists of one sort or another', Huxley was compelled to invent what he 'conceived to be the appropriate title of "agnostic,"' and, as he wrote, 'I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at our Society' (Huxley 1909, 238–9). There are two things to notice about Huxley's account of his new coinage. First, the term

was created as a way of distinguishing his religious position from atheism as well as a host of other positions. By inventing 'agnostic', Huxley was suggesting that a new category of religious position was needed in the mid-Victorian period. Second, the agnostic, as defined by Huxley, was one who accepted the idea that human knowledge was limited, and that many of the claims of Christian theologians, including the existence of a God, went beyond those limits. By the same token, assertions by atheists that there was no God were unacceptable to agnostics as they also went beyond the limits of knowledge.

The complementary strategies of denying accusations of atheism and embracing the label agnostic were partially successful. Some of Huxley's contemporaries accepted the distinction between atheists and agnostics. Richard Holt Hutton, journalist and conservative Anglican, as well as a member of the Metaphysical Society, wrote about the differences in the early 1870s in his 'The moral significance of atheism'. To Hutton, atheism was a negative force that destroyed morality and truth. But, he observed, 'there are, in the higher walks of literature, comparatively very few'. Although modern science was believed to be hostile towards faith in a personal God, 'it is not true to say of even the most negative of the men of science that they are Atheists'. Hutton noted that 'they themselves vehemently dispute the term' and preferred 'to describe their state of mind as a sort of know-nothingism or Agnosticism'. Hutton also pointed out that agnosticism was 'Professor Huxley's phrase' as well as Tyndall's and Spencer's (Hutton 1888, 22).

In his 'Atheism and the Church' (1879), G. H. Curteis divided the men of science into two groups, agnostics and atheists. Every branch of science dealt with theological issues. 'Thus', Curteis declared, 'Biology writes "Lay Sermons" in Professor Huxley; Physics acknowledges itself almost Christian in Professor Tyndall; Anthropology claims to be religious in Mr. Darwin; and Logic, in Mr. Spencer, confesses that "a religious system is a normal and essential factor in every evolving society".' In Curteis' estimation, the most eminent scientists, such as Huxley, Tyndall, and Spencer, were not hostile towards religion. Curteis was sympathetic towards their agnostic notion of an unknowable god. He wrote, 'it seems then there is a consensus among all competent persons, who have ever thought deeply on the subject, that the real nature of that Power which underlies all existing things is absolutely unknown to man'. However not all scientists were in agreement with the leading agnostics, and it was these lesser men who gave science the undeserved reputation of being atheistic. 'It is only the second-rate men of science', Curteis insisted, 'who loudly vaunt their ability to do without

religion altogether, and proclaim their fixed and unchangeable resolve for its entire suppression.' Defending the agnostics, Curteis warned that the Christian clergy should guard against the common mistake of 'abusing modern science, and depreciating its unquestionable difficulties in relation to the established theology' (Curteis 1879, 230, 232, 243).

But some contemporaries disagreed with Hutton and Curteis and did not accept their notion that a rigid distinction could be made between agnosticism and atheism. In her article on 'Magnanimous atheism' (1877), Frances Power Cobbe, social reformer, anti-vivisectionist, and leading advocate of women's suffrage, compared older and newer forms of unbelief. Whereas the 'old Atheist sheltered his vice behind a rampart of unbelief where no appeals could reach him, the new Agnostic honestly maintains that his opinions are the very best foundations of virtue'. Only by denying God, the agnostic argued, can you serve your brother on earth. Cobbe was sceptical about agnosticism and its ethics. The article was devoted to 'the consideration of this new common pretension of Agnosticism to be the true FRIEND OF VIRTUE'. She included among the agnostics figures such as the positivist Frederic Harrison, the social theorist and Whig writer Harriet Martineau, and Charles Darwin. Cobbe rejected the charges of unbelievers that the morality of theism was based on an appeal to self-interest. She contemptuously dismissed the atheist's assumption of moral superiority over theism. She also denied that there were significant differences between the old atheism and the modern agnosticism. Modern agnosticism, which she referred to as 'magnanimous atheism' because of its emphasis on its morality, failed to provide a sense of purpose or a code of justice (Cobbe 1877, 447–8, 466, 473).

Like Cobbe, the anonymous author of an article on 'The popular view of atheism' in an 1880 issue of the *Saturday Review* denied that there were significant differences between atheism and agnosticism. The piece was written during the controversy surrounding Charles Bradlaugh's admission to the House of Commons. Bradlaugh, an avowed atheist and leader of the National Secular Society, was elected in 1880 as the Liberal MP for Northampton. He was blocked in Parliament when he tried to take the religious Oath of Allegiance so that he could assume his seat. The *Saturday Review* journalist declared that Bradlaugh had not shrunk from giving himself 'the detested name of atheist'. The controversy, the journalist believed, had evoked hostility towards atheism. But it had also revealed the hypocrisy surrounding the public attitude towards agnosticism. Other Members of Parliament were openly agnostic and there were no objections to them. 'Yet it is surely a truism to say that in nine cases out of ten Agnosticism is but

old atheism "writ large"', the journalist insisted. Agnosticism was 'gaining ground in respectable society' while the 'older and simpler designation' carried with it an 'offensive connotation'. There was more sympathy for agnostics, as they were looked upon as being in a 'condition of voluntary, if not sorrowful, perplexity', while the atheist was seen as having an 'air of insolent defiance about him' since he was an 'open and notorious evil liver and blasphemer'. The label of atheism had in the past been reserved for those who 'had specially outraged the national sentiment and thus incurred popular odium'. It was 'universally understood to signify something which is really detestable' (Anon. 1880, 819–20). Since the *Saturday Review* journalist saw no real difference between atheism and agnosticism, the article implied that the latter should be considered just as offensive.

The Unitarian minister Charles B. Upton agreed with both Cobbe and the *Saturday Review* journalist. He also rejected the idea that agnosticism and atheism were easily distinguished, but added to that the point that atheism gained from the respectability of agnosticism. 'Some shades of Agnosticism are', Upton asserted,

> as I have said, not far removed from Atheism. So near, indeed, are the two, that the intellect of the majority of good people fails to distinguish clearly between them; and hence it comes to pass that since Agnosticism, as being the creed of so many eminent and popular *savans* and philosophers, is, of course perfectly respectable, Atheism – its next-door neighbor on the negative side – gets the full benefit of this close association, and can now confidently show its face at the fashionable *conversazione* and in the high-class Review without fear of being frowned upon as a disreputable intruder.

Upton singled out Tyndall and Clifford as representative agnostics who deflected odium by claiming to cherish religious emotion. But when he compared Tyndall and Clifford, the latter was much closer to atheism. Upon a 'cursory perusal' of the late Clifford's essays, Upton was convinced that he was an atheist. When he put Tyndall and Clifford's positions on the relationship between mind and body beside each other, Clifford's statements were dogmatic while Tyndall, a 'competent authority', admitted 'the ordinary belief that the Mind exerts an influence upon the Body, which Clifford had summarily disposed of as "nonsense"'. Clifford's position led to the disappearance of moral freedom and obligation, and if accepted would result in 'the decadence and final extinction of all faith in God and Immortality' (Upton 1880, 99, 102, 114).

But the identification of agnosticism with atheism was not always put forward as a strategy for condemning them both. In 1861, George Jacob Holyoake published a small book titled *The Limits of Atheism: Or, Why Should Sceptics Be Outlaws?* Holyoake was himself a leading freethinker active in the secularist movement. Up until the early 1840s, Holyoake's religious views were radical – probably Unitarian – but not extreme. He was deeply involved in Owenism. His imprisonment in 1842 led to his 'conversion' to atheism. In November 1841, Charles Southwell had started a weekly atheistic publication titled the *Oracle of Reason*. Within a month he was arrested for blasphemy. Holyoake volunteered to take on the editorial duties while Southwell languished in gaol. As he was on his way in May 1842 to visit Southwell in the Bristol gaol, Holyoake stopped in the town of Cheltenham to give a lecture on Owenite socialism. During the questions after the lecture he was asked about the role of religion in socialism and his glib reply led to prosecution for blasphemy in August 1842. At the trial he was sentenced to six months in the Gloucester gaol. After his release he went on to found a new weekly titled *The Reasoner*, which appeared from June 1846 until June 1861. Through this paper he developed the social teachings of Robert Owen into a new movement, which he referred to as secularism. Although he was an atheist, Holyoake did not make atheism the central principle of secularism. More moderate than Bradlaugh, he emphasized individual freedom of thought and expression.

In *The Limits of Atheism*, first published in 1861, Holyoake attempted to soften the image of atheism, and he drew upon Spencer to accomplish that goal. In the preface, Holyoake acknowledged that atheism is 'used by theists in hateful senses' as a justification for excluding lower-class unbelievers from civil society. Holyoake defended his use of the term by arguing that it was necessary for the articulation of a more open political discourse. For atheism had changed in recent times. It was 'no longer the old Atheism of a mere negation, but the Cosmism of modern science; neither dissolute, anarchical, nor impious'. Whereas the negative atheism of old insists there is nothing beyond the physical universe, Cosmism holds it 'cannot explain anything beyond, and pauses where its knowledge ends'. Holyoake then argued that present-day atheists were entitled to civil recognition 'as persons having legitimate, actual, and conscientious views, and who, therefore, ought not to be outlawed as they are now'. It is no coincidence that Holyoake's Cosmism sounds very much like a version of agnosticism. Holyoake draws in his book on Spencer's *First Principles*, a key agnostic text, and refers to it as 'remarkable' (Holyoake 1874, iii–iv, 10). To Holyoake, Spencer had shown

that the terms of Cosmism are as incapable of ultimate explanation as the terms of theism. This illustrated that dogmatism and intolerance on either side were unwise. Holyoake used Spencer to provide atheism with intellectual respectability. Unlike those hostile to agnosticism, he was not attacking Spencer or his fellow scientific naturalists. But he implied that Spencer's agnosticism was closely allied to the new atheism.

Cobbe, the *Saturday Review* journalist, Upton, and Holyoake were neither representatives of conservative Christianity, nor writing in conservative periodicals. Since they fell more into the liberal or radical camp, their rejections of a rigid distinction between agnosticism and atheism would have been more persuasive to the Victorian reading audience. Their position on the close, familial relationship between these two forms of unbelief was reflected in the numerous attacks on individual agnostics as closet atheists, notwithstanding the public and private pronouncements of Tyndall, Huxley, Stephen, and others. During the 1870s and early 1880s, Tyndall and Clifford were the most popular targets in substantial, critical treatments of atheism written primarily by Christian apologists.

Tyndall, especially after he delivered the provocative 'Belfast Address' (1874) at the British Association for the Advancement of Science, was frequently attacked as an atheist. A case in point is the discussion of Tyndall in Ebenezer Evans Jenkins' *Modern Atheism* (1877). Jenkins was a Wesleyan minister and missionary. During the period that Jenkins wrote his book on atheism, he was highly regarded as a preacher and speaker throughout Britain. He made several foreign tours on behalf of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, speaking at the Evangelical Alliance convention in New York in 1873, and in 1875 to 1876 visiting missions in China, Japan, and India. He was a general secretary of the Mission House from 1877 to 1888. The book was based on a lecture delivered in the King Street Chapel in Bristol on 24 July 1877.

Jenkins observed that materialistic atheists had given 'a scientific shape to what is after all a mere guess projected beyond what is proved'. Throughout the book he returns to this theme, characterizing so-called scientific atheism as speculative rather than empirical. Tyndall is used to illustrate the point about 'confounding the discoveries [of science] with the guesses of science'. These guesses assumed 'the overthrow of religion', but likely they were 'mere frolic of the scientific imagination, as when Professor Tyndall tells us that by an intellectual necessity he crossed the boundary of experience and discerned in matter "the promise and potency of all terrestrial life"' (Jenkins 1877, 5, 36). The phrase 'the promise and potency of all terrestrial life' is

a direct quote from one of the most contentious sections of Tyndall's 'Belfast Address'. Here it becomes not only evidence of Tyndall's materialistic atheism, it also points to the speculative quality of his thought. In effect, Jenkins charges that Tyndall is not true to the principles of empirical science in many of his philosophical and religious statements.

John Stuart Blackie, a classical and Scottish Gaelic scholar, was another outspoken Christian critic of agnosticism who included Tyndall among the atheists in his *Natural History of Atheism* (1877). As a young man Blackie studied theology in preparation for entering the ministry. But in 1829 he left Scotland to work with a series of German scholars, including Friedrich Schleiermacher. After returning to Scotland in 1831, Blackie became interested in the law and then the classics. He was appointed in 1839 to the newly instituted chair of Humanity (Latin) in Marischal College, and then in 1852 to the professorship of Greek at Edinburgh University, a post that he held for thirty years. In the *Natural History of Atheism*, Blackie presented atheism as 'a disease of the speculative faculty which must be expected to reappear from time to time, when men are shaken out of the firm forms of their old beliefs, and have not yet had time to work themselves into a well-defined mould of a new one'. He blamed modern science, and Darwin in particular, for producing the 'chaotic state of mind' that led to the current flourishing of atheism. In the chapter where he examined modern British atheism, focusing on Harriet Martineau and Tyndall, he referred to atheists and agnostics interchangeably. He saw no distinction between them (Blackie 1877, 2–3, 6, 241).

Blackie began his analysis of Tyndall's atheism with a reference to the 'Belfast Address', expecting to find in it 'the real sentiments of the materialists and agnostics of the present day'. Tyndall was therefore a representative of atheistic scientific naturalism. 'I have read his celebrated address over several times, with great care', Blackie told his readers, 'and I have now little doubt as to its real significance and drift.' Drawing upon his knowledge of classical literature, he discussed the section in the address where Tyndall outlined Greek atomism in the thought of Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius. This section, Blackie asserted, gave 'a decidedly atheistical or materialistic hue to the introductory paragraphs'. But Blackie believed that Tyndall's address was inconsistent. 'On the whole', Blackie declared, 'the concluding sections and the general tone of the remarks in the body of the address incline me to conclude that the lecturer is a Pantheist.' Blackie had no objection to pantheism, for 'so long as it asserts the unity of motion and spirit and mind in a reasonably ordered universe' it was a 'perfectly legitimate form of

theism, to which not even orthodox Christianity, rightly understood, need have any serious objection'. However, the slippery ambiguity in Tyndall's language prevented the impartial reader from extracting any joy from his pantheism. Tyndall's attempt to reconcile the materialistic atomism of Democritus with the pantheism of Wordsworth was impossible and doomed to failure (Blackie 1877, 241–3).

Blackie was also critical of Tyndall's handling of the religious implications of evolutionary theory. Blackie, who was open to accepting evolution, believed that Christians should have no objections to it. He therefore disparaged Tyndall's assertion that evolution posed serious problems for traditional Christian theology. Like Darwin, Tyndall pictured natural selection as performing all of the activities usually reserved for a divine being. Blackie insisted that only the notion of a God explained the order and beauty in nature. 'Without God', Blackie affirmed, 'evolution, continuity of nature, natural selection, conservation of energy, or whatever other phrases happen to have currency for the hour, are mere sound and smoke, and imaginations of science falsely so called.' Blackie was confident that modern atheism fuelled by evolution was merely a passing fad. By depicting atheism as a periodic mental disorder in the history of human thought, he could assure his Christian readers that 'the general consent of the most cultivated past of the human race' was in favour of theism and against atheism. It was a serious miscalculation to 'imagine that the peculiar doctrines and favourite fancies of a few cultivators of physical science in this small corner of the world, and in this small half of a century, are likely to exercise any notable influence over the thoughts of men, after the one-sided impulse out of which they arose shall have spent its force' (Blackie 1877, 7–8, 245, 247). Turning the tables on Tyndall and the scientific naturalists, Blackie subjected their atheism to a scientific, as well as a historical, analysis. Atheism had a natural history because it was like a diseased organic growth. Modern atheism was an ephemeral aberration that would die a natural death, just like all of its previous forms.

Tyndall was not the only scientific naturalist to be criticized widely for his atheistic tendencies. Clifford was also a major target. Hutton had already paid close attention to Huxley in articles in his journal, the *Spectator*. In 1874 an anonymous piece on 'The approach of dogmatic atheism' appeared in the *Spectator*, likely authored by him, that focused on Clifford. The article pointed out that modern representatives of physical science had drawn 'the most imperiously dogmatic conclusions from the most ostentatiously hypothetic premises'. In Clifford, this tendency had grown to the extent that agnosticism

had been transformed into dogmatic atheism. The journalist referred to Clifford's recent *Fortnightly Review* article on automatism – the notion that all human actions are predetermined by physical causes. In Clifford's mind, humans were like robotic machines with no freedom to choose. Here, Clifford, the journalist declared, had put forward the essence of 'the creed of all reasonable men to-morrow'. By defending determinism, Clifford had undermined faith in Providence. But Clifford's anti-theistic statements were based on speculation, although they were presented in such dogmatic fashion. The *Spectator* journalist condemned Clifford's combination of atheism with a 'distinct and vivid confidence in the absolutely mechanical character of man's bodily life'. If widely accepted, the 'automatic-atheistic theory' would lead to a world of savagery. However, Clifford was a mathematician, and he had no authority or expertise to pronounce on this topic. 'Professor Clifford is great in his own field', the journalist acknowledged. 'In the field he has now chosen he is hurling about wildly loose thoughts over which he has no intellectual control' (Anon. 1874, 1525–7).

William Hurrell Mallock, a novelist, religious polemicist, and political writer, also treated Clifford as an important representative of atheism. Born into the traditional world of an old Devon gentry family, and educated at Balliol College, Oxford, Mallock became interested in religious controversies due to his hostility to the master of his college, Benjamin Jowett, a liberal Anglican. Mallock was committed to Tory and High Church principles. In his satirical novel *The New Republic* (1877), Mallock depicted the state of contemporary intellectual life. The novel was set in a country house in Devon, where party guests discussed the burning religious and moral issues of the day. The guests include three men who were thinly disguised caricatures of Huxley (Mr. Storks), Tyndall (Stockton), and Clifford (Saunders). Throughout the book, Clifford is portrayed as a young hothead who constantly embarrasses Huxley and Tyndall by putting forward their position too starkly. '"And the worst of it is," said Mr. Storks, "that these young men really get hold of a fact or two, and then push them on to their own coarse and insane conclusions – which have, I admit, to the vulgar eye, the look of being obvious"' (Mallock 1950 [1877], 183).

Mallock also wrote journal reviews and books in which he continued his attack on scientific naturalism. In an article titled 'Modern atheism', which appeared in the *Contemporary Review* in 1877, Mallock took Clifford and Tyndall to task for their destructive views on morality. Mallock picked these two scientific naturalists as examples of 'prominent and popular apostles' of unbelief. 'I choose men of science in preference to any others',

Mallock declared, 'because, in the opinion of the world at large, it is the authority of men of science by which Unbelief has been established. They are the men that in the present day are listened to; who are supposed to speak with authority.' It was Mallock's goal to undermine both their scientific and cultural authority. Although Tyndall and Clifford wrote about the importance of morality, and of listening to what our moral sense told us was right, they in effect eliminated God and immortality from the discussion. Mallock argued that everything was turned upside down if God and immortality were lost (Mallock 1877, 171–3). In his book *Atheism and the Value of Life* (1884), Mallock treated Clifford as a 'typical spokesman of our modern ethical atheism'. Here, he laid bare the inconsistencies in Clifford's adherence to both atheism and a form of morality deeply indebted to Christianity. Raised a Christian, Clifford attempted, unsuccessfully, to retain Christian ethical principles based on a non-theistic perspective (Mallock 1884, 15, 82).

Contemporary critics like Mallock and Blackie made it difficult for the scientific naturalists to use agnosticism as a defence against charges of materialism and atheism. As late as 1886, Spencer wrote to Huxley complaining about the unscrupulous tactics of Christian opponents. Spencer was upset by an article on 'Materialism and morality' in the *Fortnightly Review* by the English barrister, man of letters, and committed Catholic, W. S. Lilly. In this article, Spencer told Huxley, 'you and I are dealt with after the ordinary fashion popular with the theologians, who practically say – "You *shall* be materialists whether you like it or not"' (Huxley 1903, II, 470). Perhaps it was some consolation that by the 1880s materialism and atheism were no longer as scandalous as they had been in earlier decades. In 1880 Upton declared 'that the profession of Atheism does not now shock the sentiment of society as it once did' (Upton 1880, 98).

If we compare the nineteenth-century scientific naturalists with the current defenders of evolutionary science, the basic strategy has changed significantly. Whereas Huxley, Tyndall, and others identified themselves as agnostics in order to distance themselves from atheism, figures like Richard Dawkins embrace atheism with enthusiasm. Ignoring denials of the nineteenth-century agnostics, Dawkins has tried to recruit Darwin into the atheist cause in his *The God Delusion* (2006). Dawkins argued that Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is 'the ultimate scientific consciousness-raiser' as it 'shatters the illusion of design within the domain of biology, and teaches us to be suspicious of any kind of design hypothesis in physics and cosmology as well' (Dawkins 2006, 114–18). Darwin, according to Dawkins, demolished the design argument, the foundation of all natural theology. The only proper

conclusion to draw from the current state of scientific knowledge is therefore that atheism is the most enlightened position to embrace. It is not just Dawkins that attempts to erase the distinction between the agnosticism of Darwin and the Darwinians and contemporary atheism. Dawkins has been referred to in the media as 'Darwin's rottweiler', while Huxley was widely known as 'Darwin's bulldog'. But these playful 'pet' names, which point to the aggressiveness with which both have defended Darwin's theory of evolution, conceal significant differences between the two biologists when it comes to their unbelief. Huxley made the concept of non-overlapping magisteria the basis for his reconciliation of science and religion. In doing so, he maintained an autonomy and value to religion. Dawkins rejects all forms of religion, endorses the notion of a conflict between science and religion, and advocates for the expansion of science into all realms of knowledge. The 'new atheism' is far more antagonistic to any compromise in comparison to the old agnosticism of the nineteenth century.

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22

Freud and the Unconscious

MARSHA HEWITT

> Religion is the record of the wishes, desires, and accusations of countless generations.
>
> *Max Horkheimer, "Thoughts on Religion," 129*

Sigmund Freud's critical theory of religion continues to generate controversy and dismay within and beyond psychoanalysis. A number of his critics attempt to separate his views on religion from the rest of psychoanalysis, a misguided and fruitless enterprise, as I will demonstrate in this chapter. Such critics appear to think that religious experiences and beliefs must be protected from psychoanalytic theories such as unconscious fantasy and projection in order to maintain the illusion that religious realities possess their own *sui generis* essence or inherent nature that renders them immune to critical examination and explanation. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, transcendent dimensions are not independently existing ontological realities that are apprehended by human minds. Rather, they are mental creations that are culturally constituted, shaped, and expressed. While it is not unreasonable to interpret Freud's writings in a broadly colloquial sense as atheistic, it is woefully insufficient for scholarly analysis. In part this is because the term itself is so carelessly wielded, affectively charged, and overdetermined that it is by now almost devoid of theoretical utility. While I agree that there are "as many varieties of atheism as there are varieties of theism" (Hyman 2007, 29), my purpose here is not to engage in an exhaustive genealogical analysis of atheism, its diverse range of meanings or contested philosophical interpretations. Rather, I will base my discussion upon a major working assumption that is most relevant for an adequate understanding of atheism *with respect to Freud*: atheism and modernity are "inextricably linked" (Hyman 2007, 28). Moreover, I agree with Paul Ricoeur's prudent caution that any critical analysis of Freud's atheism must attempt both to *"determine what kind of atheism"* emerges in his work (Elder 1995, 347) and its connection with

"psychoanalysis proper" (347). Rather than framing my analysis of Freud within a larger discussion of atheism, I will instead frame my remarks on atheism within the larger theoretical context of Freudian psychoanalysis as an explanatory critical theory of religion.

Atheism (derived from the Greek *a*, without, + *theos*, god) most simply means *without* belief in a god (Martin 2007, 1). Thus, strictly speaking, atheism does not by itself necessarily denote nor advocate a belief or set of arguments intent on proving that god does not exist. This is important to bear in mind with respect to Freud. His occasional use of the term "atheist" to describe his own position on the existence of god is far closer to the negative sense of atheism as *un*belief than to the more positive understanding that equates atheism with the *belief* that god does not exist. Freud had no interest in engaging in fruitless debates about the existence, non-existence, or nature of God, or in adjudicating any "truth-value of religious doctrines" (1927, 33). Rather, he was interested in investigating the internal, psychological dynamics of the minds of religious believers in terms of desire, attachment needs, and unconscious fantasy. What Freud meant by his wry self-description as a "godless Jew" referred to his sense of Jewish identity that was neither defined by nor contingent upon *belief in the existence of god*. In this sense, his various references to himself as an unbelieving, irreligious, "out-and-out *un*believer," as he wrote in a 1938 letter to Charles Singer (1961, 448; my emphasis), is the inevitable correlate of his unwavering theoretical argument that science and faith are inherently irreconcilable. *This premise grounds and shapes not only his critique of religion, but Freudian psychoanalysis itself.*

Religion: The Enemy of Science

As far as Freud was concerned, secular reason and science, on the one hand, and religious faith, on the other, are mutually negating. Valid epistemologies yielding knowledge of the real world can only be constructed upon evidence-based reason, not faith. In this sense, Freud was a typical Enlightenment *philosophe*, which is evident in his insistence on linking psychoanalysis to the epistemological foundations and investigative methodologies of the "scientific method" (Gay 1987, 52–3). Freud belongs to the demystifying, irreligious philosophical traditions represented by figures such as David Hume (1711–76), Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), and Karl Marx (1818–83). Although Freud's open admiration for Feuerbach is well-known (Hewitt 2014, 15–18), his agreement with some of Marx's core ideas is nonetheless heavily implied in a number of places. However extensively or superficially Freud may (or may not) have

read Marx is far less important than those views he held in common with him. *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) resonates in several places with a number of Marxian elements, such as the recognition of the social and economic sources of human suffering. I agree with Peter Gay that Freud's critique of religion strongly suggests that, like Marx, Freud also thought that the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism (Gay 1987, 17).

Both Freud and Marx hold that history is created by human beings. Freud was keenly aware that religious institutions, traditions, and teaching alienate human beings from their moral, political, intellectual, and psychological (Freud 1927, 47–9) capacities through a wide array of calculated strategies aimed at the preservation of ideological hegemony and political power. Like Marx and Feuerbach, Freud also asserted that gods, spirits, and demons are the unconsciously projected, historically mediated and culturally shaped illusions of human minds (1927, 28). Freud also clearly understood that the ravages of poverty and its impact on women "who have nearly succumbed under their burden of privations" and their children is directly linked to mental illness. The most destructive and painful sources of human suffering, he wrote, are caused by "our relations to other men" (1930, 77). Freud's awareness of the interconnections between material conditions and psychological health led him to advocate for free psychoanalytic treatment. In his public address to the Fifth International Psychoanalytic Congress in Budapest just before the end of World War I, he expressed hope that the "conscience of society will awake and remind it that the poor man should have just as much right to assistance for his mind as he now has to the life-saving help offered by surgery" ([1918] 1919, 167).

As previously mentioned, no other area of Freud's thought continues to cause more furious controversy than his critique of religion. As I have argued elsewhere (Hewitt 2014; Hewitt 2020), it is a serious mistake to treat Freud's differentiated and complex critique of religion as separate from his overall psychoanalytic theory. His writings on religion are not the product of cultural dabbling, but are integral to his entire psychoanalytic theory. I also fully agree with Peter Gay's conclusion that "if Freud had been a believer . . . he would not have developed psychoanalysis" (1987, 31), his "creation" (Freud 1927, 36). Along with Feuerbach and Marx, Freud viewed religion as psychologically, ideologically, and thoroughly culturally constituted. He also did not hesitate to point out the harmful implications of religion, both within the mind as an impediment to psychological growth and as a source of multiple injustices in society (Freud 1927; 1930; 1933a). A number of Freud's critics remain as dismayed by his uncompromising critique of religion today as they were in

his own lifetime. His friend Oskar Pfister, a Swiss Protestant pastor, could not bring himself to take Freud at his word that he was an irreligious unbeliever, going so far as to declare, "A better Christian never was" (Gay 1988, 602). Pfister, who admired Freud, seemed to equate morals and personal integrity with religiosity. Against all Freud's repeated and explicit statements about his own irreligious unbelief, Pfister nonetheless insisted that Freud's "battle against religion" was motivated by his unacknowledged "religious feeling" (Roazen 1993, 559). Since Freud's time, psychological analysis of his personality rather than engaged critical analysis of his texts has become an increasingly common strategy to undermine both his critique of religion and insistence that religion and psychoanalysis are irreconcilable.

Theologizing Psychoanalysis

Ana-Maria Rizzuto, whose psychoanalytic ideas are inextricably infused with her personal Christian faith, is one of the leading representatives of what I call theological psychoanalysis. Instead of engaging theoretically with Freud on religion, she reduces his critique to the confines of what she regards as his own personal pathology. Rizzuto flatly concludes that Freud's "proud achievement" and chief "goal" was defined by "debasing the deity" (1998, 157). For her, religion is not an illusion, as Freud maintained, but a necessary and "integral part of being . . . truly human" (1979, 47). In some respects, Freud would have no problem agreeing that illusions are part of human psychology. Interestingly, he distinguished illusions from delusions. Whereas delusions contradict reality, illusions are not always *necessarily* false. Despite the fact that they are motivated by wishes that a state of affairs be a certain way, for the most part illusions can be neither proved nor disproved. One may harbor the illusion that hanging around movie sets often and long enough will result in a starring role in a Hollywood film. Although highly unlikely, such illusions do not necessarily defy reality. While "the riddles of the universe reveal themselves only slowly to our investigation," and science cannot provide all the answers to them, Freud maintained that science is "the only road" to knowledge of "reality outside ourselves" (1927, 31). Illusions may well be comforting and harmless, but they cannot be regarded as epistemologically equivalent to science.

If, as Rizutto writes, Freud's goal was to debase God, hers is to explore the positive psychological importance of the "formation of the God representation" (1979, 41) and establish its role in creating "meaningful realities . . . beyond the boundaries of the senses" (47). It appears that in order to

substantiate her claim that religion is vital to mental health, Rizutto needs to discredit Freud's critique of religion by psychologizing his unbelief rather than critically engaging with his texts. This is unfortunate because she can make her case for associating religious belief and psychological well-being, as many others have done, without repudiating Freud on religion. Freud created psychoanalysis, but he does not own it. Rizutto's strategy to discredit Freud on the grounds of his personal defects accounts for her failure to identify and confront Freud's far more important premise that faith-based and modern, secular reasons are mutually exclusive because they rely on radically different forms of epistemological warrant. For Freud, the recognition of reality represents a "momentous step" in psychological development (1911, 219). For Rizutto, "Reality and illusion are not contradictory terms" (1979, 209). Freud would see Rizutto's declaration as a statement of faith that has no place in psychoanalysis as he conceived of it.

Rizzuto's faith commitments and her need to defend them leave her no alternative than to psychoanalyze Freud's personality and thereby unintentionally weaken her own arguments about the psychological benefits of religion. Such an approach results in a number of caricaturizations of Freud's thought, such as her preposterous claim that *Moses and Monotheism* amounts to a "displacement" of Freud's unconscious conflicts. Rizutto callously trivializes Freud's work as a "psychological autobiography of . . . a man near death who feels the need for closure, the need to tell himself and others about his personal journey" (1998, 184). Freud's theory of Jewish identity and physical survival, the Jewish legacy to humanity not only of monotheism but also the capacity for abstract thought, the creation of moral norms and principles that constitute some of the highest achievements of culture, are dismissed as little more than the pathetic speculations of an old man facing death. This kind of rhetorical move exemplifies a crude psychoanalytic table-turning that is all too familiar to psychoanalysts. Rizutto's unfortunate indulgence in using this worn-out maneuver leads her to the theoretically empty conclusion that Freud's entire critical theory of religion "can be read as an unintended psychobiography of his private and unwitting transformation into a 'godless Jew'" (1998, 270).

Like Rizzuto, Jesuit priest and psychoanalyst W. W. Meissner also prefers to psychoanalyze Freud rather than seriously address the substantive elements of his critique of religion. Meissner speculates that Freud's critique of religion was motivated by his personal envy of "the power of religion" and the "repressed, unresolved, and ambivalent aspects of his own psychic functioning" (Meissner 1984, 55, 78). For Meissner, Freud's unconscious

conflicts also determined his uneasy "relationship to Judaism [that] was fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence" (41). A major theoretical weakness in both Meissner's and Rizutto's criticisms of Freud's theory of religion is their failure to distinguish between *psychoanalyzing Freud* and *thinking psychoanalytically* about his arguments. These are very different enterprises whose importance cannot be overstated. Psychoanalyzing Freud's putative personality deficits is an intellectually bankrupt *ad hominem* strategy that does not carry the theoretical weight Rizutto, Meissner, and some other critics seem to think it does. Religiously invested critics such as Rizzuto and Meissner miss the key point that when Freud writes about religious experiences, fantasies, and beliefs, he is not advocating a case against the existence of God. Rather, *he is theorizing the psychological dynamics underlying them.* Moreover, not only did Freud the clinician not oppose his patients' religious views (Gay 1987, 98), he also recognized their beneficial effects, as in the case of the Wolf Man (Freud 1918, 114–15).

As I have also argued at greater length elsewhere (Hewitt 2014, 27–30), Freud's theory that the God of Jewish and Christian monotheism has its psychological and emotional origins in the dependent, vulnerable infant's need to feel safe and protected is not to say that religious believers are *infantile*. Rather, Freud is locating the origins of religious fantasies, experiences, and beliefs in the *infantile stage* of human psychological development. In many respects, Freud anticipates later attachment theory with his insight that the infant's emotional and physical survival depends upon the protection of its parents, especially the father. Meissner is by no means alone in suspecting that, unconsciously, Freud was far more influenced by religious beliefs and, in particular, Jewish mysticism, than he consciously recognized. As Marthe Robert rightly concludes with respect to those authors who insist that there are resonances in Freud's thought with Kabalistic teachings and other forms of mysticism,

> No parallel can be drawn between Freudian theory and any mystical tradition whatsoever unless we ignore everything Freud thought and said on the subject of such parallels. Quite a few authors make [this] mistake . . . they tend to disregard the opinions which Freud stated most clearly and to which he was most attached, as though the mere fact that he was the first to throw light on the hidden motivations of our opinions justified them in ignoring his personal convictions. (Robert 1976, 171)

Jonathan Lear dismisses Freud's writings on religion and culture as "the least valuable aspect of Freud's work" (2005, 192). His concern with Freud's

critique of religion as an inadequate basis of morality misses Freud's far more important argument that religion negates human autonomy in moral decision-making and forecloses on independent, critical thought. A genuine and enduring basis of morality cannot be derived from blind obedience to divine commands (1927, 39), but rather from convictions based on the capacity for abstract reasoning. As the "limitation of instinct" (Freud 1939, 118), ethics represents the developmental achievement of critical thinking about desire and its implications. This "advance in intellectuality" (123) (*Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*) develops out of hard-won renunciation of instinct which is a precondition of the moral foundation of modern democratic societies grounded in secular reason rather than blind submission to heteronomous authority. Freud had far less quarrel with the ethical content and moral precepts of religion than with its insistence on unreflective obedience to the moral and epistemological hegemony of religious institutions and teaching. In this sense, Freud is in philosophical alignment with Kant's enlightenment motto, "Have courage to use your own understanding!" ([1784] 1983, 41) which for him is a central feature of psychological maturity. As far as Freud was concerned, the entire aim of psychoanalysis was to develop and foster the growth of ego's "scrap of independence" (1921, 129) as an antidote to mindless conformity and blind submission. An autonomous ego, no matter how fragile or limited, is nonetheless an essential component of independent critical thought and moral decision-making.

Some commentators, although less concerned with Freud's critique of organized religion, nonetheless strenuously object to his equally critical views of mystical experience. For some of these critics, his efforts to explain the *unio mystica* or oceanic feeling in *Civilization and its Discontents* merely provides further evidence of Freud's personality defects. As I have pointed out on more than one occasion (Hewitt 2014; 2020), Freud did not "dismiss" or denigrate the "oceanic feeling" (Breger 2000, 329) described by his friend Romain Rolland. In his response to Rolland's contention that the *unio mystica* experience is the origin of religion, Freud attempted to explain mystical experience by way of his theories of the unconscious and primary narcissism (Freud 1930, 64–73). Contrary to the widespread claims of several of his critics, Freud did not *dismiss* Rolland's view about the origin of religion, he *disagreed* with it, and took some pains to explain why. Unfortunately, Freud's frank admission of not having had his own mystical experiences is sometimes invoked to disqualify his theory instead of engaging with it (Farber 2017, 720). Psychoanalyzing Freud fails to answer the question about how to account for those who do not have religious experiences that give them

access to transcendent truths (Freud 1927, 28). Are they to be dismissed as psychologically impaired or morally insensate? While there are a variety of differences and nuances in the views of Freud's critics, there is a fairly consistent line of argumentation that repeatedly circles back to Freud's "personal biases or, too often . . . his unresolved personal conflicts" (Elder 1995, 347) that somehow are enough to dispense with his critique of religion.

The lack of critical engagement with Freud's texts on religion that is represented by the authors mentioned above can be explained by their commitment to defend religion not only against Freud's "atheism," but against atheism in general, which is their deeper concern. Lear reassures his readers that even if one accepts Freud's view that religious beliefs are illusions, that "need not give us a reason to abandon religious belief" (2005, 206). Lear's stated aim is to "open up possibilities for a deeper psychoanalytic engagement with moral and religious commitment" (192). However, a serious engagement with religious ideas does not nor should not result in their uncritical acceptance. Rizutto asserts that "to ask a man to renounce a God he believes in may be as cruel and as meaningless as wrenching a child from his teddy bear so that he can grow up" (1979, 209). Freud would agree with her to a limited extent. He not only understood that attachment to religious beliefs can be as powerful as human attachments (1927, 47), he conceded that to forcefully deprive people of their religious beliefs would be cruel. In a comment that is reminiscent of Marx, Freud compared the "effect of religious consolations" to "a narcotic" (49). While he acknowledged that abrupt withdrawal of either religion or drugs risks harm, he thought there was a greater risk to civilization in preserving religion than in giving it up (35). Freud argued that a widespread commitment to "irreligious education" or "education to reality" would provide a cultural antidote to the "religious prohibition of thought" (48, 49, 48).

Psychoanalysis and "Ruthless" Critique

Although Freud never hesitated to declare his identity as a Jew and "never repudiated his people" (1930, xv), he also did not flinch from standing by his critique of religion even if it caused distress or gave offense to his fellow Jews. The opening lines of *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) directly acknowledge the pain he knows he will cause the Jewish community with his theory that Moses was an Egyptian, and that monotheism was an Egyptian creation (7). In his view, depriving his fellow Jews of "the greatest of their sons" (7) is the necessary price of a far more important commitment to reason and truth, the

antitheses of faith and of which Moses is a creation. As Jan Assmann points out, since there is no evidence that Moses ever existed, he is a figure of "memory without history" who is nonetheless "enormously alive in all kinds of cultural and religious traditions" (2016, 61). Unwavering in his insistence on the irreconcilability of science and religion, Freud maintained that "truth" and "knowledge" must always take precedence even if they exacerbated the precarious situation of the Jews in the deepening darkness of Hitler's Germany. While the morality of this line of argument is certainly debatable, Freud defended his decision to publish *Moses and Monotheism* in this way: "I have spent my whole life standing up for what I have considered to be the scientific truth, even when it was uncomfortable and unpleasant for my fellow men" (E. I. Freud 1961, 448).

Nearly 100 years earlier, Marx described his own similar commitment to "a ruthless criticism of everything existing, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be" (Tucker 1978, 13). The devotion of both Marx and Freud to uncompromising critique sheds further light on the *kind* of atheism they shared and its integral relationship to their larger theories. Marx's statement on the meaninglessness of the very concept of atheism to his own ideas about the "real existence" of humanity applies to Freud as well and is thus worth quoting:

> the question about an *alien* being, about a being above nature and man – a question which implies the admission of the inessentiality of nature and of man – has become impossible in practice. *Atheism*, as the denial of this inessentiality, has no longer any meaning, for atheism is a *negation of God*, and postulates the *existence of man* through this negation.
>
> (1844, in Tucker 1978, 92)

If for Marx, human history is created by human beings through their laboring activity, then for Freud, the invisible worlds of transcendent entities and supernatural or superhuman beings is created by humans in their psychic or mental activity. For both Marx and Freud, the critical analysis of religion is central to showing how it impairs the capacity for critical thought by distorting reality. They also share the view that the consolations of religion serve to maintain and support hegemonic social, cultural, and political hierarchies of injustice. In foreclosing the capacity for critical thought, Freud observed, religion promotes unquestioning acceptance and obedience to teachings that have neither epistemic validity nor moral warrant. Rather, religious teachings base their coercive legitimacy upon ancestral authority whose "authentication" cannot be questioned (1927, 26). The minds of

religious believers, especially the "underprivileged classes," are shaped from an early age to accept social injustices by internalizing the moral and epistemological dictates of religion and identifying with its patriarchal divine authority. As a psychoanalyst, Freud understood that the "surplus of privation" that "suppressed people" are forced to endure fosters envy and destructive rage against the status quo (12). Similarly to Marx, Freud argued that religion is a mystifying ideology that alienates the human mind from its own powers of insight. It also undermines the capacity for intellectual and moral autonomy which is a precondition for recognizing the causes of oppression. In another statement that fairly brims with Marxian sentiment, Freud flatly concludes: "It goes without saying that a civilization which leaves so large a number of its participants unsatisfied and drives them into revolt neither has nor deserves the prospect of a lasting existence" (12).

Freud's critique of religion, like Marx's, has nothing to do with "debasing the deity," since, for them, there is no deity to debase. For these sons of the Enlightenment, the very notion of God was irrelevant. Freud and Marx opposed religion because it deludes human beings about their true nature as the moral, autonomous agents of history, conceals the real causes of injustice, distorts the nature of reality, and obscures the ways in which society mediates and shapes internal and external relationships. The critique of religion for Freud was the precondition for an "*education to reality*" (1927, 49). An "irreligious education" (48) that looks to science and evidence-based reason rather than faith-based belief was humanity's best chance "to gain some knowledge about the reality of the world" which in turn would empower people to take charge of their own lives (55) and improve their material conditions and mental health. In this way, psychoanalysis is an emancipatory critical social theory committed to the transformation of concrete existence. Psychoanalysis insists that social and material change must be accompanied by internal, psychic change in "the knowing individual as such" (Horkheimer 1972, 199). Marx's call for the transformation of the "inverted world consciousness" (in Tucker 1978, 53) of religious illusions as conditional to overcoming the multiple forms of internal and external alienation can only be accomplished with the aid of psychoanalysis.

Max Horkheimer's description of the role of the critical theorist applies to psychoanalytic theory and clinical practice as well: "If . . . the theoretician and his specific object are seen as forming a dynamic unity with the oppressed class, so that his presentation of societal contradictions is not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation but also *a force within it to stimulate change*, then his real function emerges" (1972a, 215; my emphasis).

Although Freud did not try to talk his patients out of their religious beliefs, his critique of religion is integrally connected with his therapeutic goal of relieving suffering "here on earth" by making "men aware of this hell so that they can free themselves of it" (Goetz et al. 1982, 290). Changes in society cannot occur in the absence of changes within the minds of those who can make them. The revolutionary power of psychoanalysis ensures "that no one educated in it will in later life take the side of reaction and suppression" (Freud 1933b, 151). In disclosing his long-standing interest in social and cultural analysis, Freud explains that

> the events of human history, the interactions between human nature, cultural development and the precipitates of primaeval experiences (the most prominent example of which is religion) are no more than a reflection of the dynamic conflicts between the ego, the id and the super-ego, which psychoanalysis studies in the individual – are the very same processes repeated upon a wider stage. (1925, 72)

As this statement clearly demonstrates, psychoanalysis for Freud is not only a therapeutic practice and theory of the human mind, it is also a critical theory of society and culture.

Freud and Critical Theory

The first generation of critical theorists known as the "Frankfurt School," represented mainly by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, engaged most directly with psychoanalytic concepts such as the unconscious, drives or instincts, internalization, repression, and projection. Jürgen Habermas, the leading representative of the second generation of critical theorists, moved away from psychoanalysis, preferring the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. The third generation, most notably represented by Axel Honneth, draws upon the object relations theory of D. W. Winnicott in its emphasis upon the interpersonal and social relationships of reciprocal recognition necessary to support networks of solidarity and humane ways of life.[I] The early Frankfurt theorists engaged with Freud in formulating their theories of the multiple dimensions of domination and the modalities of both internal and external oppression. As Marcuse wrote, "Behind all the differences among the historical forms of society, Freud saw the basic inhumanity common to

[I] For a critique of the origins of object relations theory, especially its Christian-based anti-Judaism, see Hewitt (2018).

all of them, and the repressive controls which perpetuate, *in the instinctual structure itself*, the domination of man by man" (1955, 235; my emphasis). The Christian founders of object relations theory in the first half of the twentieth century strongly rejected what they saw as Freud's Jewish-influenced portrayal of hate, destructive aggression, and cruelty in favor of a more benign view of human nature as motivated by Christian agapic love (Hewitt 2018). As far as Freud was concerned, religious illusions and consolations that man is made in the image of a loving and good deity belonged in the nursery (Freud 1930, 120). Gay is right to conclude that only an irreligious, "aggressively secular" (1987, 124) "Godless Jew" could have created psychoanalysis.

The vital question about the kind of atheism embraced by Freud is linked to another equally important question about psychoanalysis as a critical theory of society and culture. From its very beginning, critical theory has been directed toward establishing what Horkheimer called "the right kind of society" (1972a, 218). For Horkheimer, as well as Marx and Freud, social structures of hierarchical inequality and injustice are not only destructive, they are inherently irrational. As mentioned earlier, Freud's awareness of the relationship between poverty and mental health led him to advocate for a "democratic and egalitarian" (Danto 2016, 54) psychoanalysis. On more than one occasion Freud challenged the prevailing social and religious moral norms that regulated and restricted sexuality as socially unjust and psychologically harmful: "The requirement . . . that there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone, disregards the dissimilarities, whether innate or acquired, in the sexual constitution of human beings; it cuts off a fair number of them from sexual enjoyment, and so becomes the source of serious injustice" (Freud 1930, 104). He challenged the exclusive primacy of heterosexual monogamy where procreation is valued over sexual pleasure "in its own right." For Freud, the "sexual life of civilized man is . . . severely impaired" (105). Freud's critique of "civilized" sexual morality that is "sanctioned by religion" is grounded not only in psychoanalytic theory, but in clinical observation. "Experience teaches us that for most people there is a limit beyond which their constitution cannot comply with the demands of civilization. All who wish to be more noble-minded than their constitution allows fall victims to neurosis; they would have been more healthy if it could have been possible for them to be less good" (Freud 1908, 191). In passages such as these, Freud is calling attention to the irrationality of prevailing morality and religious teachings that contradict the observations gained through clinical work. It is not necessary to agree with Freud's specific

views on sexual morality in order to see that his use of clinical observation and evidence-based reason is the antithesis of moral attitudes based on faith.

Psychoanalysis, Secular Reason, and Moral Modernity

J. Bernstein's (2013) critique of Habermas' proposal that religious believers and non-believers assume an "equality of burdens" by translating the moral intuitions contained in religious and irreligious worldviews into a shared commitment to liberal values of pluralism and mutual tolerance casts further light on Freud's critical theory of religion. The specific details of Bernstein's critical assessment of Habermas' postsecular thesis are less relevant to this discussion than his analysis of the decisive differences between religious faith and modern secular reason. Although he makes no reference to Freud or psychoanalysis, Bernstein's delineation of the opposed rationalities of faith and secular modernity is in close theoretical alignment with Freud's critique of religion. Moreover, a comparison of Bernstein and Freud lends further support to my argument that Freud's atheism has far less to do with his personal psychology than with his intellectual commitment to moral modernity and secular reason.

For Bernstein, the biblical story of the *Akedah*, or binding of Isaac (*Genesis* 22), brings these differences between faith-based and secular morality into sharp relief. Bernstein chooses this biblical story because of its enduring importance in the faith lives of religious believers. As he rightly observes, the narrative of Abraham and Isaac "stands very near the center of Western religious spirituality" as an exemplary testament to Abraham's unwavering faith in God that grounds his equally unwavering obedience to God's commands, including filicide. The only way for Abraham to justify his unquestioned willingness to murder his son is to utterly forfeit his own capacity to think for himself about the meaning of his action. In Bernstein's view, Abraham's decision to murder Isaac was the psychic and moral equivalent of the murder itself. From the perspective of modernity, Bernstein judges Abraham to be "forever guilty" because in the "unbending of his intention *Abraham does sacrifice Isaac*." As Bernstein explains, "Abraham was not required to complete the action because, given the complete nature of his intention, he had already sacrificed Isaac, giving his life totally over to God. Nothing was withheld; Isaac was killed, killed in the very heart of Abraham . . . In order to die to the world one must slaughter one's living attachments to the world, one must murder one's love of the world and offer

it to God" (2013, 170). Bernstein echoes Freud's view that religion maintains its power by "depressing the value of life and distorting the picture of the real world" (Freud, 1930, 84) with its demand for the believer's "unconditional submission" to "God's 'inscrutable decrees'" (85).

Ruth Stein follows a similar logic in her psychoanalytic interpretation of fundamentalist religious violence in the context of 9/11. The drive toward transcendence through negation of the worldly realm of existence that idealizes and morally privileges the vertical relationship with an abstract entity demands the emotional and, in extreme situations, literal annihilation of human relationships. Loyalty and love of God take precedence over ethical relationships with others. As I have written elsewhere, the love of God can be a powerful motivator in acts of religious violence, as illustrated in a letter written to Jessica Stern by a young religious militant: "Don't ever think that we're afraid of death in defending our religion . . . This is our call . . . we're just seeking for bigger love from Him" (Hewitt 2010, 183). In Ruth Stein's description of the psychodynamics of the binding of Isaac, sacrifice involves not only the destruction of the other, but the annihilation of a part of the self.

> In a deep sense, God did not ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but to sacrifice himself, Isaac representing the most precious and desirable part of himself, the part that would revitalize him in his old age. Isaac is here a tool for God's demand-need for proof that He, God, is loved beyond life and beyond Abraham's love of himself. God needs Abraham to kill and immolate what is most precious to him, thereby killing a part of himself. This is a love of a special kind: *it asks God's worshipper to kill himself in the other*.
>
> (Hewitt 2010, 44)

Bernstein argues along similar lines that Abraham's faith requires him to "surrender everything that directly binds him to life and the world . . . In human terms, faith is world hatred" (2013, 168). As Jesus is alleged to have told his followers, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, *even his own life*, he cannot be a disciple of mine" (*Luke* 14:26; my emphasis).

If faith is "sacrifice of self and other" then "secular reason" and its commitment to relationships of solidarity and justice must be its antithesis, "the protest against sacrifice" (Bernstein 2013, 175) that demands the unconditional repudiation of faith. Bernstein insists that faith by its very nature requires the abdication of intellectual and moral autonomy in disowning thought: "every act of faith depends on a suppressed 'I think'." What Freud earlier identified as "the religious prohibition of thought" (1927, 48) is

described by Bernstein as no less than "intellectual suicide" (2013, 165). Since "rational and moral modernity" are predicated upon "the destruction of faith itself" (155), there can be no such thing as a thoroughly modern "postsecular" society that can exist on a level of moral and cognitive equivalence with religion in the public, political realm. Secular reason cannot abdicate its "determining authority" and "cognitive worth" to the moral or epistemological intuitions of faith (160). Thus Habermas' demand that irreligious citizens "adopt an agnostic attitude to religious beliefs" and translate "dogmatic belief" (160) into secular epistemological and moral frameworks threatens to seriously compromise liberal democracies and forms of life which are the bedrock of modern, pluralistic, egalitarian societies. Bernstein would agree with Freud that "the truth cannot be tolerant . . . it must be relentlessly critical if any other power tries to take over any part of it." Religion is the "enemy" of science and critical thought (Freud 1933a, 160).

Both Freud and Bernstein embrace a commitment to rational and moral modernity that is the negation of religion and faith. What Bernstein sees in Caravaggio's early seventeenth-century painting, the *Sacrifice of Isaac*, is the repudiation of faith and the emergence of moral modernity (2013, 155) in its depiction of a father's attempted murder of his son. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, Abraham's expression in the painting appears dissociated as he is about to kill Isaac; the angel looks desperate as he physically struggles to convince Abraham to kill the ram instead of the child; and Isaac, his face contorted in screams of terror as his father presses his hand on his neck in preparation for cutting his throat, is the searing emblem of childhood trauma. Caravaggio's painting not only heralds the arrival of "moral modernity," as Bernstein argues (155), it is also a visual representation of the unspeakable trauma experienced by the victim of parental brutality. Bernstein's philosophical critique can be formulated and extended psychoanalytically through an exploration of the mental operations that are generated in order to justify and valorize this scene as the apex of faith. What is the nature of the mental state of a parent intent on murdering their child? What are the psychological and cultural dynamics involved in transforming and elevating this event into a desired spiritual achievement? What message do religious parents communicate to their children in holding up Abraham as an idealized exemplar of faith? What are children to make of God's approval of a father's willingness to not withhold his "son," his "only son" (*Genesis* 22:17) from a murderous command? This biblical narrative is an example of the transmission of religious trauma across generations of religious believers who are asked to

dissociate their horror and submit to divine will, no matter how morally repugnant on a human level.

Conclusion

At the end of *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud describes the relationship of the human mind – "our organization" or "mental apparatus" – to reality. The mind is embedded in the world, and "is itself a constituent part" of the reality it sets out to investigate. In studying the world, we study ourselves: "the ultimate findings of science, precisely because of the way in which they are acquired, are determined not only by our organization but by the things which have affected that organization." Freud goes further, concluding his analysis of the human mind as part of the reality it seeks to study, with: "the problem of the nature of the world without regard to our percipient mental apparatus is an empty abstraction, devoid of practical interest" (1927, 56). In other words, there is nothing known to human beings that they have not had a part in creating. Gods, spirits, and demons are all culturally and historically constituted mental creations that give shape and meaning to the unformulated unconscious depths of our mental life. If an independent ontological transcendent reality exists apart from human beings, it holds no "practical interest" for Freud because it can tell us nothing about the nature of the reality in which human beings live, breathe, and die. We use our minds to study our minds and the worlds we create. This is all we can know. The concluding lines of *The Future of an Illusion* not only side with science; they describe the kind of atheist Freud was and the psychoanalysis of irreligion that he created.

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PART V

*

CLASSICAL MODERNITY: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CURRENTS

23

The French Revolution

XAVIER MARECHAUX

"La mort est un repos éternel." Death is but an eternal sleep. These words were posted in every cemetery of the city of Nevers by order of Joseph Fouché, the *Représentant-en-mission* assigned to the department of Nièvre in central France on 10 October 1793. Never before had such a clearly atheist statement been made publicly by a member of the French government. The inhabitants of two villages on the outskirts of Paris, Ris and Mennecy, followed suit, declaring to the Convention, on 30 October, that they were renouncing the Catholic faith. Three weeks earlier, on 5 October, the Convention had adopted a new calendar cleansed of any reference to Christianity; the starting point was no longer the birth of Christ but the founding of the first Republic on 22 September 1792. Months were divided into three ten-day units, the decades, the tenth day, the *decadi*, substituting for Sunday. These events marked the beginning of the atheist Cult of Reason (or, to quote some conservative historians, the beginning of a "collective hysteria") that swept through France between the fall of 1793 and the early spring of 1794. During that period of time, in almost the entire country, the Catholic faith was no longer celebrated. In May 1794, Robespierre, wary of the damage that forced atheism could inflict on the progress of the Revolution, tried to put an end to the Cult of Reason by promoting the Cult of the Supreme Being and the Immortality of the Soul. This cult did not outlast Robespierre, who died in July of the same year. Historians have dubbed this episode of attacks against the Church, its clergy, and Christianity in general the "Dechristianization of Year 2." The Cult of Reason was clearly atheist. But, even after 1794, the goal of undermining Christianity by promoting a civic religion remained: It was embodied in the official *culte décadaire* and a semi-official *Theophilanthropy*. Long after the Revolution, atheism would once again be promoted by the Saint-Simonists in the 1830s and by Auguste Comte in the 1840s with the *Religion of Humanity*.

The sudden rise of the Cult of Reason has raised and continues to raise many questions; the task of answering them has proved difficult, and it continues to divide historians today. What was the meaning of the Cult of Reason? What factors prompted its appearance in October 1793? Who were its promoters? And, last but not least, what long-term effects did it have, if any, on post-revolutionary French society?

The Origins of the Dechristianization of Year 2

In the years preceding the Revolution, very few people openly professed their atheism. Among those who did, a pamphleteer by the name of Sylvain Maréchal most certainly inspired the dechristianizers of Year 2. In a poem entitled *Dieu et les prêtres; fragments d'un poème moral sur Dieu* (God and priests; fragments of a moral poem on God), first published in 1781 and again in 1790, he proposed that the worship of God be replaced by the cult of Virtue and that faith be replaced by reason. His proposal for a secular calendar, which he presented in 1788 in his *Almanach des honnêtes gens*, became the basis for the Republican calendar. However, although there had been attempts in the early months of the Revolution to modernize the Church and limit its influence, the Cult of Reason, when it was launched, surprised most contemporaries (and some historians). The freedom of religion set down in Article 10 of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, voted on 26 August 1789, the subsequent nationalization of Church property in November 1789, and the suppression of contemplative orders in February 1790 were merely evidence of the Church's own weakness and of the Deputies' fear of its influence. These first reforms came about both as a result of radical Enlightenment's anti-Church and anticlerical propaganda and of the deep internal divisions in the Church itself between Jansenists and pro-Jesuits. At this point, however, no one could imagine a society without an official Catholic Church (except for a few Protestant Deputies). The civil constitution of the clergy, voted in July 1790, was the rational consequence of the Representatives' desire to exert control over the Church. However, the subsequent refusal by most of the Bishops and half of the parish clergy to accept the new organization of the Church in effect deepened the crisis between the revolutionaries and the clergy, the latter seen more and more as an enemy of reform. The refractory clergy (priests who rejected the civil constitution of the clergy) became the first target of suspicion. Then, in spring 1793, the revolt against the Convention in the Vendée, in the name of king and Church, was seen as evidence that the Church was promoting counter-revolution. Also, and before the events in the Vendée, the battle inside the Convention between

the *Girondins* and the *Montagnards* after the fall of the monarchy in August 1792 undermined even the constitutional clergy whose views aligned with those of the moderate *Girondins* against the *Montagnards*. The arrest of the *Girondins* Deputies in June 1793 and the civil war that followed helped spread the suspicion of counter-revolution to the constitutional clergy and its hierarchy. Such were the circumstances in which dechristianization was launched. In October 1793, the *Montagnards* at the Convention, supported by the *sans-culottes*, their allies on the street, had managed to deal with the main dangers facing the nation; they had established the Terror and set up a revolutionary government which authorized recourse to any means deemed necessary to the preservation of the Revolution. The invasion led by the first European coalition had been stopped; the Federalist insurrection, led by the outlawed *Girondins* Representatives after the 2 June 1793 coup attempt, was losing ground; the royalist revolt in the Vendée had been beaten back. Some revolutionaries saw in these military successes an opportunity to complete the work of national regeneration that had begun with the fall of the monarchy, by eliminating "fanaticism" and the last traces of the Old Regime in French society. However, the *Montagnards*, united when the Republic was in danger, started to split into different factions. Danton and Robespierre thought the Cult of Reason was part of a plot hatched by the leaders of the Paris Commune, Jacques Hébert and Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette; they accused them of using dechristianization as a means to set the Parisian sans-culottes against the Convention. Many historians of the early twentieth century agreed that the Cult of Reason had been an attempt at a Parliamentary coup; Alphonse Aulard thought the *Hébertists* were behind the coup; Jean Jaurès defended the thesis, followed much later by François Furet; Albert Mathiez thought that the *Indulgents* (Danton and Desmoulins) had instigated the cult, and the Hébertists had followed. For these authors, therefore, the Cult of Reason was neither spontaneous nor popular; it was launched from above solely for political purposes. However, an examination of the many different actors involved tells a very different story.

The Agents of Dechristianization

Today, the thesis of a Parliamentary coup no longer stands on sufficiently solid ground and is deemed too simplistic. In fact, the actors involved are particularly diverse. There was of course the Paris Commune led by Chaumette and Hébert; they launched the first anticlerical measures after 10 August. Chaumette's attitude, however, was ambiguous: He attempted to hold back the iconoclastic onslaught on Notre Dame Cathedral and, on

29 November, he rescinded the municipal decree of 23 November 1793 mandating that all places of worship be closed and that priests be persecuted. The Paris *Sections* also took part; on 12 September 1793, the Panthéon Section demanded *écoles de la liberté* where "the abhorrence of fanaticism" was to be taught every Sunday; the Sections were particularly active in implementing the measures dictated by the Commune. Also, as members of the revolutionary army created by the Convention on 5 September 1793, the Parisian *Sectionnaires* spread the Good Word in the provinces. This army was charged with ensuring the provision of supplies to the army and the towns, and its members played an important role in launching dechristianization in the provinces, first around Paris, then on the way to Lyon, and finally around the city of Lyon itself.[1] The regular army also certainly contributed, particularly in the border regions, although its role is more difficult to gauge. The sans-culottes of the suburbs closest to Paris were also essential players; it was under their impulse that the towns of Ris and Mennecy became the first municipalities to renounce the Catholic faith on 30 October 1793. Still, the role played by the Convention should not be underestimated: It was the registering body for dechristianization and, at times, its promoter when it ordered the destruction of the royal tombs at Saint-Denis. This despite the fact that it attempted to slow its progress, issuing a decree initiated by Robespierre on 6 December 1793 reemphasizing the freedom of religion. Last but not least, the *représentants-en-mission* are thought to have been the initiators of dechristianization in the provinces, most notably Fouché in the department of Nièvre and Albitte in the Ain. Still, even they did not act alone; they relied on local actors favorable to dechristianization and loyal to the revolutionary government in Paris. These included the municipalities (often duly purged of opponents), the surveillance committees, and people's societies, as well as the local revolutionary armies. It is therefore difficult to single out the real instigators among the many different participants.

A civic ceremony celebrated in Laon in the department of the Aisne on 10 brumaire, Year 2 (31 October 1793), provides a good example of the web of responsibilities involved; all the groups mentioned above played a part. The festival was organized by the popular society of Laon with the help of the representatives of the Parisian sections (designated, in the report sent to the Convention, as the sans-culottes of Paris, or "our brothers in arms"), one of whom, Bardin, a member of the Panthéon-Français section, gave a civic speech. The regiments stationed in the city (the 26th Regiment of

1 On this, see Cobb (1963).

Chasseurs and the 6th Regiment of Hussards) also played an important role, especially by providing the music. However, the main instigator was the représentant-en-mission Louis-Félix Roux, who "laid out in a stirring speech the real principles of republicanism, extolled the steadfastness and courage of the sans-culottes, and denounced the perfidious advance of the Republic's internal and external enemies." During the festival, two stones from the Bastille were carried aloft together with the text of the *Rights of Man* in a triumphal procession; statues of Catholic saints were pulled down and an *auto-da-fé* of objects representing the Ancien Régime was set up, after which a tree of Liberty was planted. Finally, as the author of the address to the Convention says,

> We proceeded to the house of the so-called catholic cult, and there we danced and enjoyed a fraternal meal. Each citizen brought bread and stew. The citoyennes [the citizen's wives] shared in the general rejoicing with their husbands and children. At the end, several choirs sang, there was dancing, patriotic couplets followed by jubilant cries of joy and the constant refrain was: "Long live the Republic, the Constitution, and Liberty!" Rounds of cannon fire shook the air at every delightful moment of which citizen Roux, the People's representative, was the soul.
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> (Archives Parlementaires (AP), Vol. 79, 61)

This patriotic festival was a forerunner of dechristianization. Still, an investigation into who exactly was responsible throws up even more questions. Certainly, the Paris sectionnaires, the regular army, as well as Representative Roux seem to have played important roles. However, according to the historian Richard Cobb, Roux, a vicar to the Bishop of Haute-Marne, took part only reluctantly. Only under pressure from the Parisian revolutionary army stationed in Laon did he renounce his sacerdotal functions and marry a woman in Laon. When the popular society of Laon acclaimed "our Parisian brothers in arms" it most probably meant this army.

Furthermore, alongside Roux and some elements of the Parisian revolutionary army, still another Representative conducted dechristianization in Aisne: Sylvain-Phalier Lejeune. On 3 brumaire (24 October), and so very early in the movement to dechristianize, Lejeune had married four canons from the town of La Fère and he had forced fifteen other priests to abdicate and return their letters of priesthood. Finally, on 18 brumaire, both Roux and Lejeune had ordered that all the silver used in the Catholic ritual be brought to the Treasury and that the bells be taken down. In Article 4, they decreed "All the townships of the department of Aisne are invited, in the name of

sacred truth, to no longer adhere to any cult but the cult of Reason, Justice and Liberty, and to dedicate their temples to these tutelary divinities who alone must command men" (AP, Vol. 80, 99).

Although historiography has traditionally stressed the role of the French capital in dechristianization through both the revolutionary army and the représentants-en-mission (veritable proconsuls with unlimited powers) and notwithstanding the previous example, one should be careful not to generalize. In some departments, dechristianization was in fact led by local personalities. Euloge Schneider, a former priest and professor of philosophy at the University of Bonn, provides a good example of their role. Having been named public accuser for the revolutionary tribunal of the Bas-Rhin in May 1793, he abdicated the priesthood and soon married. He was the prime instigator of the Terror and of dechristianization in the department; as commander of the revolutionary army of the Bas-Rhin, he sowed terror throughout the department from October to December 1793; he had thirty-one people executed; he was responsible for the abdication of about thirty priests and Protestant ministers. In the end, his excessive cruelty led to his arrest on 15 December 1793, on orders of Representatives Saint-Just and Le Bas. He was taken to Paris and guillotined on 10 April 1794. However, the Bas-Rhin, located far from the center of France and so less susceptible to influence from Paris, remains atypical. The department of Nièvre, being a more typical case, is a better place in which to throw some light on all the different actors involved in launching the movement in the provinces. They were all there: the People's Representative Joseph Fouché, assigned to the Nièvre as of July 1793; Chaumette, the Prosecutor-Syndic of Paris, present in the department from 18 to 23 September; local members of the sans-culottes such as the popular Society of Nevers led by Socrate Damour; the local revolutionary army. In an article that greatly contributes to our understanding of dechristianization in the provinces, Nicole Bossut has investigated the diverse responsibilities (Bossut 1986). She describes how, having arrived in the Nièvre on 29 July, Fouché acted cautiously at first in order to "avoid offending religious beliefs while enlightening those that held them on the meaning of political events in which they might find themselves involved." Then, his course changed radically after his famous speech against priestly celibacy of 23 September; the local administration made it into a decree two days later. Fouché then spent a week in Moulins, where, with the help of the local revolutionary army, he set up a policy of dechristianization that would later be implemented in the whole department. His decrees of 18 and 19 vendémiaire (9 and 10 October) mandated the dismantlement of the steeples

of those parishes that had been closed, the prohibition of any public manifestation of faith, and the secularization of burials and cemeteries.

The revolutionary army of Nièvre, with 300–350 men, became notorious for its iconoclasm directed at any object representing feudalism and religion, particularly in the district of Clamecy, closing churches on 20 brumaire, and in Corbigny, Decize, and Moulins, where, between 25 and 30 brumaire, they closed churches and engaged in iconoclasm. Did Chaumette inspire Fouché or was it the other way around? The Paris Commune had started to move toward secularization of burials as early as 1792: This could have inspired Fouché, but for the fact that the commune launched its own anti-religious iconoclasm on 2 brumaire (23 October 1793), almost a month after Chaumette had returned to the capital. Some contemporary testimony portrays Chaumette as a mere assistant to Fouché and certainly not a prime mover of dechristianization. Both men shared the same political and philosophical sensibilities, and Fouché did not need a Parisian to guide him in matters of policy. But what about the local powers? According to Nicole Bossut and Serge Bianchi, the représentants-en-mission launched dechristianization to gain the support of the local leaders of the sans-culottes, "the avant-garde of the people," and, in the Nièvre, the "Jacobin avant-garde and sole intermediary between Fouché and the masses" (Bianchi 1976, 369; Bossut 1986, 187).

However, the short list of local dechristianizers compiled by Nicole Bossut includes only members of the affluent bourgeoisie of the Nièvre; no peasants, no shop-keepers, no craftsmen. Certainly, Fouché waited for the best opportunity to launch his campaign either to be sure he would have the support of the leaders of the Jacobins or on the contrary following their lead, it makes no difference in the end. Fouché and the ten or so activists of the Nièvre were part of the small minority in power who all shared the same anticlerical and atheist ideas characteristic of their social "class." Did they really need the policy of dechristianization in order to enjoy popular support? I doubt it; the Montagnards' economic policies should have been enough. Also, this type of Marxist-inspired interpretation of dechristianization gives too little importance to the role of the représentants-en-mission. Fouché, Albitte, and many others like them took their anticlericalism and in some cases their atheism with them when they came to the provinces. They waited until the opportunity arose to launch dechristianization, with the help of local minority elements. Still, in most cases, the Representatives were the sole instigators. In fact, although in Paris and its environs the middle and lower classes were to a considerable degree already dechristianized, in the provinces this touched only the elites and a minority among the popular classes. This is why, had

there not been the représentants-en-mission, acting on the authority of the nation, the push toward dechristianization would not have had such a wide-ranging impact.

The desacralization of death and the rejection of the dogma of resurrection proclaimed by Fouché's posters in the cemeteries of the Nièvre went far beyond anything the local sans-culottes could have imposed, and it was in any case a violent affront against the beliefs of the great majority of people. That policy was nothing but the fruit of Fouché's own philosophical convictions. In the Ain, the local Montagnards would never have been able to order on their own the massive dismantling of religious structures or the compulsive recantation of so many priests. Only Albitte could impose these orders. Those responsible for the attacks against the constitutional clergy and the forced marriage of priests were the représentants-en-mission. Only they continued to promote dechristianization long after Robespierre's death and the end of the Terror. Albitte, for instance, was still presiding over the abdication of priests in Nice in September 1794; Fouché, as minister of police under the Consulate, was still pursuing anticlerical policies, hunting down refractory priests and hounding them out of France (thus provoking the Consul's anger).

The extreme anticlericalism, the atheism in some cases that manifested itself during the episode of dechristianization, therefore seems confined to the elites both in Paris and in the provinces, and to the lower classes in Paris. However, studies of the revolutionary festivals of Year 2, demonstrating for instance their great popularity in the Aisne, seem to point to popular support for what were very often anti-religious celebrations. What, in fact, was the case?

The Revolutionary Festivals of Year 2: Manifestations of Atheism?

The atheism of the Cult of Reason was present in the more or less sophisticated ceremonies that took place in churches that had been converted into "temples of Reason." A church building would be reconfigured to celebrate the "fêtes décadaires" (tenth-day celebrations) in place of the Sunday mass. To these ceremonies were added the festivals for the martyrs of the Republic and for the Republic's victories, and later the festival of the Supreme Being, instituted as a cult by a decree of the Convention dated 18 Floréal, Year 2 (7 May 1794). The festivals of Reason and the fêtes décadaires were clearly atheist celebrations, but the other celebrations were also considered as

contributing to dechristianization in the fight against the Catholic religion, its Church, and its clergy. The festivals of Reason and the fêtes décadaires represent 30–40 percent of the festivals held during Year 2 (not including the festivals of the Supreme Being). The festivals of the martyrs of Liberty make up 15–20 percent of the whole; they honored the memory of Marat, Louis-Michel Lepeletier de Saint-Fargeau, a member of the Convention assassinated on 20 January 1793, just before Louis XVI's execution, and Joseph Chalier, a Jacobin guillotined by the counter-revolutionary city of Lyon in July 1793. These men were hailed as the "revolutionary trinity" or "triad." The festivals celebrating the victories of the Republic were the most frequent, amounting to 40–50 percent of all the festivals held during Year 2. Only in the latter was the Convention directly involved; on 4 nivôse, Year 2 (24 December 1793), it decreed a national festival to be held throughout France on 20 nivôse (9 January) to celebrate the return of Toulon to France. These victory festivals would continue as the army won still more battles until thermidor.

How to explain these cults? The revolutionary festivals of Year 2 stand out among the other types of celebrations of the period because of the popular support they enjoyed. Should one therefore conclude that the majority of the population adhered to the dechristianization of Year 2? The answer is no. Historians of the Revolution, faced with these apparent contradictions, have had difficulty capturing such a complex phenomenon. A summary of the various interpretations was provided by Serge Bianchi in an illuminating article on dechristianization in Year 2:

> Catholic historians were not alone in highlighting the close relationship [between the Catholic rituals and the revolutionary cults]. Aulard, as well as Jaurès, thought that the revolutionary cults were popular only because they provided a religious transfer, a substitution of values inside an essentially unchanged framework. For his part, Albert Soboul emphasized syncretism; for him, a sacralization of revolutionary values occurred, and, for the most part, the rites of the new cults were but a transposition of Christian rituals. In every case, (as Bernard Plongeron also thought) the point was to satisfy needs of a religious nature, creating a bridge between the old ways and the new, acknowledging in the end that the people still needed Jesus and his saints. (Bianchi 1978, 361–2)

Serge Bianchi has questioned this idea. He has shown that the sans-culottes of Paris and its environs were recruited among sectors of the population who were already dechristianized or under-christianized (members of the lower or lower-middle classes of Paris: day laborers, guild members, builders,

woodcutters, poor farmers, small holders in the vineyards around the capital). Therefore, even if revolutionary festivals mimicked certain aspects of the Catholic ritual, this in no way proves that their promoters remained attached to a religion they themselves had already rejected or stopped practicing. Consequently, according to Bianchi, "the fundamental meaning of the cult of the Martyrs was to preserve the Revolution's gains; it was to honor those, relatives and friends, who were fighting for its aims or had given their lives in its name: values that are in no way reducible to the preservation of Christianity, and are often clearly opposed to it" (Bianchi 1978, 364).

Bianchi bolsters his thesis by pointing to elements of the revolutionary cult, such as religious masquerades and dechristianizing iconoclasm, that are totally incompatible with Catholicism.

The revolutionary festivals of Year 2 in fact took many different shapes and took on different meanings and added symbols in such a way as to prevent easy categorization or interpretation. No festival was alike but they shared many common features and, in spite of their diversity, they all celebrated more or less the same things. The festival held in Saint-Denis on 30 brumaire (20 November), "in memory of Marat and of the others martyrs of Liberty . . . and to celebrate Reason's sacred victories over fanaticism and superstition" is a good example. This festival became a model, a perfect symbol of all the celebrations of Year 2, after an account was published in the *Moniteur universel* (AP, Vol. 79, 709–10). It recycled some features of the first festival of Reason celebrated on 20 brumaire in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, but with added pomp and solemnity. Like all these ceremonies of Year 2, it borrowed features from the Catholic ritual as well as from traditional town fairs:

- It possessed something artificial, almost theatrical; there was a stage, painted backdrops (an artificial mountain, a statue of truth); a choir of young women, an actress portraying Liberty.
- Its shape harked back to religious processions: the marchers stopped at various points on the way in imitation of the Stations of the Cross.
- Some of their features recalled village feasts: "civic and fraternal banquets" concluding the celebrations.
- The martyrs of Liberty and the philosophers of the Enlightenment were represented by busts of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Franklin together with those of Marat, Lepeletier, and Chalier, placed side by side inside a grotto in the artificial mountain.
- Patriotic singing and speeches dotted the festivities; two riders, armed and equipped by the popular society, appeared.

- An *auto-da-fé* of the "vestiges" of feudalism and monarchy celebrated the end of the Ancien Régime.
- A speech denouncing fanaticism was given inside the church, which had been turned into a temple of Reason, marking the festivities as part of dechristianization.

Parliamentary archives hold the records of approximately 1000 of those festivals. What surprises the reader most is the evident popularity of these celebrations, the enthusiastic response they generated. All this is very different from the staid ceremonies under the Directorate or even the festivals of the Supreme Being. The civic, pedagogic, edifying aspect of these festivals was present, but it left much room for more or less spontaneous patriotic celebrating with some elements of dechristianization.

After one such festival, in Bitche (Moselle) on 12 nivôse, Year 2, to celebrate "the victories of defunct Toulon and the victories of the Moselle and the Rhine," Représentant-en-mission Maure reported the following:

> During the procession, the young people shouted cries of Long live the Republic after each refrain of the patriotic songs. There were several speeches, and their effect was such that, on their way down from the fort, the people brought out the confessionals and burned them in the center of a circle formed by all the townspeople of Bitche; all this with a thousand cries of Long live la Montagne, Long live the Convention, Long live the Republic, one and indivisible; a frugal banquet followed by dancing, adorned by the female citizens of Bitche put a fitting end to the festivities. (AP, Vol. 83, 276)

These festivals were in effect in equal measure patriotic manifestations and part of dechristianization. Indeed, Aulard's first interpretation was that dechristianization was "first and foremost a means or an expedient by which to defend the nation, to defend the Revolution" (Aulard 1925, 115); it was necessary to "take all power away from the anti-patriotic, or counter-revolutionary priests, which amounted to the same thing." I would go further: In fact, these festivals were more Republican than patriotic; they celebrated the many different benefits brought by the Revolution: the end of the Ancien Régime and everything it represented (feudalism, monarchy, the Church's hold on society); the advent of the Republic; the birth of universal suffrage; the Republic's victories. All this without rejecting the Catholic religion. I therefore agree with Bianchi who, in a recent book on the villages around Paris, revised some of his previous conclusions, noting that, "the Republican, civic values that are taking hold do not eliminate older beliefs. The most 'politicized' villages experienced dechristianization as unmediated

and objective membership in a political and ideological dynamic specific to Year 2, more than as a philosophical, reasoned stand against Catholicism and its content" (Bianchi 2003, 532–3).

The people's enthusiasm, or to quote Aulard, the "atmosphere of militant jubilation" of these celebrations is undeniable. A look at the register of addresses to the Convention reporting each festival gives ample evidence of their success; most took place in the north-west of France and the region of Paris and from there all along the Rhone valley, but even Brittany accounted for quite a few (Vovelle 1991, 283).

What to say, in light of this evident success, about the Cult of the Supreme Being that the Convention established by decree on 18 floréal, Year 2 (7 May 1794)? Historians have always separated – correctly, in my opinion – the Cult of Reason from the Cult of the Supreme Being. Scholars from the first generation of historians of the Revolution, such as Adolphe Thiers and Philippe Buchez, praise Robespierre for his efforts to preserve the freedom of religion and for abolishing the atheism of the Cult of Reason by replacing it with the Supreme Being. Among second-generation historians, Alphonse Esquiros and Louis Blanc remain close to their predecessors, presenting Robespierre as defending a "religion of emotion" against atheism and its "political corollary, anarchy." Other authors (Alphonse de Lamartine, Jules Michelet, Edgar Quinet), on the contrary, are very critical of Robespierre and his attempt to create a state religion; Lamartine because he was fervently Catholic, Quinet and Michelet because of their anticlericalism; they linked the Cult of the Supreme Being to Robespierre's dictatorship. In Michelet's words, "The day the dictator appeared as future king of priests, France, alerted, deposed him as it had Louis XVI" (Michelet 1889, IX, 573).

The biggest difference between the Cult of Reason and the Cult of the Supreme Being lies in their origins, the Cult of Reason appearing more or less spontaneously while the Cult of the Supreme Being was decreed by the Convention under the impulse of Robespierre. How was it received? The great number of favorable reports (1235 in less than four months, according to Vovelle) sent to the Convention might lead one to conclude it was popular. The opposite is true. These reports expressed the relief felt by those writing them that the excesses of the atheist Cult of Reason and dechristianization had come to an end, rather than real support for the new religion, which, in any case, was to disappear immediately after Robespierre's death. The civic cult, on the other hand, which had been instituted concurrently with the Cult of the Supreme Being, was to have a very different fate.

Religion under the Directory: The Décadaire Cult and Theophilanthropy

Both the Thermidorian Convention and the Directorate vigorously pursued the construction of a "civic religion" celebrating the great events of the French Revolution. These celebrations shared many features of the project put forth by Robespierre on 18 floréal, Year 2 (7 May 1794) in his famous report on the Supreme Being, "*Sur les rapports des idées religieuses et morales avec les principes républicains et sur les fêtes nationales*." The report laid out, among other things, a plan for four commemorative celebrations: on 14 July, 10 August, 21 January, and 31 May (the end of the *Gironde*). On 3 brumaire (two days before the end of the Convention), Pierre Daunou, a moderate legislator jailed during the Terror, presented a report on public education in which he proposed several national festivals. The Directory followed suit, adding a series of laws on 23 nivôse, Year 4, and 10 thermidor, Year 4, that reconfigured Robespierre's proposal into a system of five festivals: 14 July, 10 August, 1 vendémiaire (birth of the Republic), 21 January (death of Louis XVI), and a new one, 9 thermidor (advent of the new regime) to replace 31 May. Despite a few modifications, the ideas remained the same: celebrating the Revolution in purely civic festivities so as to make patriotism, as Daunou put it, "the one cult common to all Frenchmen." In addition, a decree of 14 germinal, Year 4, reaffirmed the use of the Republican calendar in all administrative matters, enforcing the *décadi* as the day off work and reinvigorating the *décadaire* cult. These measures were part of the arsenal of repression against both the legitimate and the constitutional Catholic churches after the coup of fructidor (4 September 1797) by which the Jacobin left returned to power. A new pledge of "hatred of monarchy" was demanded of every public servant and the priests who refused to comply were again arrested and deported. It comes as no surprise that these public festivals, imposed from above, were unsuccessful. The lower classes, having been excluded from participation in politics after the Directorate's reinstatement of the poll tax, did not feel they had much to celebrate. The cult of Theophilanthropy suffered the same fate even if it did benefit from a certain *succés d'estime* until the Consulate made it illegal.

On 18 September 1794, the Convention took stock of the results of its policy of religious terror: much damage had been inflicted on the Constitutional Church by the fact that 5000 priests had married and approximately 20,000 had been forced to abandon the priesthood. The Republic therefore would no longer recognize any religion. A sort of religious freedom

subsequently took hold still under the watchful eye of the government. Under the Directorate, there was a proliferation of religious practices alongside traditional and constitutional Catholicism resulting in a cacophony of religious voices. Among the more serious attempts, Theophilanthropy stands out; it was started in Paris in December 1796 by Jean-Baptiste Chemin-Dupontès, a Parisian bookseller, with help from Valentin Hauÿ, who was known at the time for his work on behalf of the blind. It was deist and moralizing; its theology simplified (its only tenets the existence of God and the immortality of the soul) and its rituals fairly similar to those of the Catholic Church but without priests. It was attractive enough to draw a diverse group of people disappointed by the Constitutional Church, of anticlerical activists, and even some die-hard atheists such as Sylvain Maréchal. Theophilanthropy benefited from the support of Louis-Marie de La Révellière-Lépeaux, one of the directors: in spring 1797, and especially after the coup of fructidor, he tried to establish it as the official religion of the regime together with the civic cult. Theophilanthropy met with certain success among the enlightened bourgeoisie and in some departments. Bonaparte put an end to the experiment when he signed the concordat in 1801 as part of his policy of reestablishing control over the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, there was real popular enthusiasm at the time for the Republican festivals honoring the heroes who had died for France; after the deaths of General Joubert and General Hoche there were magnificent commemorative ceremonies throughout France on 20 October 1797 and 1 October 1798, foreshadowing the future cult of the army and its leader under the Consulate and the Empire.

The Patriotic Cult of the Consulate and the Empire

The diminishing popularity of Republican festivals at the end of the Directorate resulted in a law enacted on 3 nivôse, Year 8 (24 December 1799) reducing the number of festivals to two: 14 July, "the day freedom was won" and 1 vendémiaire (the anniversary of the founding of the Republic). By then the *culte décadaire* had collapsed entirely.[2] The two Republican festivals were themselves celebrated less and less in Paris as well as in the provinces, and when the Empire was proclaimed they disappeared. Still, Napoleon was anxious to preserve the appearance of Republican legitimacy even as he was establishing

2 On Republican celebrations and their transformation under the Consulate and the Empire, see Triolaire (2006).

a dynastic form of government. A difficult balancing act was attempted at the coronation; its organization was federative, each department sending a delegation. At a time when a large majority of Frenchmen were still favorable to the Revolution, the goal was to echo the festival of the Federation of 14 July 1790, and involve the population as a whole in the coronation, turning it into a symbol of national unity around (or behind) the emperor. Memories of the Republic, however, were definitely put to rest when the minister for religious affairs, Portalis, on 9 February 1806, decreed Christian celebrations in honor of Napoleon; Saint Napoleon was to be celebrated on 15 August, coupled therefore with the devotion to Mary; also to be celebrated were the anniversary of the coronation together with the victory at Austerlitz, on the first Sunday of December.

The gradual disappearance of Republican festivals and the establishment of a cult of Napoleon still left room for glorification of the army as a symbol of the nation as a whole effected through conscription; this authorized a renewal of patriotic ardor equal to the heyday of the *"La Patrie en Danger"* under the Convention. The glorification of the army (and therefore of its commander) was sustained by an effective propaganda tool, the *Bulletins de la Grande Armée*, and even more effectively by a series of celebrations in Paris in November 1807 in honor of the Imperial Guard and, in 1808, for other elements of the army as they were marching through France on their way to Spain. The celebration of the Guard took place in Paris on 25–28 November; soldiers paraded under an impressive triumphal arch; there were hot air balloons above, and acrobats; golden laurels were awarded to the eagles of the Guards regiments (Hughes 2012, 90–8).

In the years between the Consulate and the 1848 revolution, religion remained an important preoccupation and there were again attempts to create new creeds; there were two great figures: Saint-Simon and his assistant, Auguste Comte. Only the latter created a truly atheist doctrine, the Religion of Humanity.

From Saint-Simon to the Religion of Humanity

It is difficult to summarize Saint-Simon's thinking on religion because his ideas evolved constantly and also because, after his death, his disciples considerably altered his legacy. Claude Henri de Saint-Simon, like his revolutionary precursors, Chemin and Hauÿ, endeavored to create a new moral and humanistic religion on the ruins of the Ancien Régime. In *Lettre d'un Habitant de Genève à ses contemporains*, published in 1803, he proposed a religion under

the aegis of a disembodied god similar to the Supreme Being of the Revolution, with the same symbols, a religion that would aim at encouraging the sciences and nurturing social cohesion. Worship was structured around "Newtonian Councils" made up of the most respected scientists of the time who would meet in temples and also laboratories and universities. He further refined his thinking in 1808, in his *Introduction aux travaux scientifiques du XIXe siècle*. He argued that religion must help maintain an orderly society, and it must be modified as soon as it begins to act as a brake against change, as the Christian religion had done since the Enlightenment. It was therefore necessary to establish a new religion which he called 'Physicism' that would be founded on the most recent scientific advances in order to promote them. He warned, however, that this atheistic religion should be the purview of 'educated people'; "Deism should be [allowed] for the ignorant classes" so as not to offend their prejudices too violently. In the last book he published, just a few months before his death, *Dialogues entre un conservateur et un novateur*, Saint-Simon returned to a kind of deism in an attempt to redirect his religion toward helping the destitute and making progress more humane. This religious dimension was then taken up and emphasized by the new leaders of the Saint-Simonians, Barthélémy-Prosper Enfantin and Armand Bazard, the "supreme fathers" of a new church with rites closely modeled on those of the Catholic Church. According to the new creed, society must be organized into producer classes under the guardianship of a new priestly caste acting as spiritual guides and also overseeing humanity's industry. Their god, although they denied it, was similar to Spinoza's "one substance" (Monism). Saint-Simonism, at the height of its influence, did have several hundred members and thousands of sympathizers, but it was its dogma of faith in industry and scientific progress rather than its religion – it was quickly turned into ridicule – that was its real legacy after its last remaining adherents dispersed in 1832.

Auguste Comte, born in 1789, was also influenced by the Revolution and he wished for a new social order. As personal secretary to Saint-Simon from 1817 to 1824, he took part in the elaboration of his theories, but, as an engineer (he studied at the Ecole polytechnique) he put more weight than did his master on the necessity of theory before practice. According to him, building a new, post-revolutionary world could only be achieved through an extension of scientific or "positive" methodology to the study of society, still the last bastion of metaphysicians and theologians. This study was to be based on the law of the three stages he outlined in his *Cours de Philosophie positive* (six volumes, published between 1830 and 1842).

According to this law, every society passes through three stages: theological, metaphysical, and positive. Passing from one stage to the next is made possible by scientific progress: this is the engine of the evolution of history. In its final stage, society is no longer governed by revealed religion but by the laws of science. After the revolution of 1848, Comte turned his philosophy of positivism into a religion in which, instead of god, the object of worship is Humanity, "the sum of past, present, and future beings who together help bring the universal order to perfection." Thus, Humanity became an object of devotion, but also of scientific study through sociology, and an object of transformation through the implementation of policies aimed at the betterment of society and its environment. He created sacraments (baptism, marriage) and a calendar commemorating secular sages and servants of humanity, in a manner somewhat similar to the civic cults of the Revolution.

How much impact did Comte's religious thinking have? As was the case with Saint-Simon, his switch from philosophy to religion was met with bewilderment, consternation even, and finally total rejection on the part of many of Comte's disciples. Comte, sole "grand priest" of his religion, died in 1857, without naming a successor; one of his young disciples, Pierre Lafitte, took up the torch but the movement languished. In 1882, it had 260 paying members at most; at the turn of the twentieth century, internal dissensions put a definitive end to the experiment.

Conclusion: Atheism and Revolution

How should one understand the various atheist philosophies that had an impact on France from the Revolution of 1789 to 1848? On the one hand, Saint-Simonism and Positivism clearly arose from the wish to create a new social order that would replace the Ancien Régime and at the same time avoid revolutionary unrest. But the Cult of Reason of Year 2 and the subsequent dechristianization remain a matter of controversy among historians both in terms of their geographic expansion and their depth.

Michel Vovelle, one of the forerunners in the study of Year 2 and dechristianization, provides a useful summary of the main interpretations of these events in a book first published in 1988:

> How should we evaluate this episode? A tragic accident, the folly of a day, which left intact the real depth of faith of the masses who bowed their heads under the storm? Or rather, on the other side of the coin, the great interruption in religious history, at least in French religious history, which separated

> a state of Christianity characterized by unanimity of practice from one in which the participation of the laity caused the appearance of a gradual advance in disaffection, lasting from the nineteenth century right up to the present day? Unless – a third hypothesis – this brutal dechristianization, suddenly flaring up, simply brought to light the true state of indifference which had already begun, doubtless the result of philosophical propaganda during the Enlightenment: the fault of Voltaire, the fault of Rousseau?
>
> (Vovelle 1991, 6)

For Vovelle, this last hypothesis is the correct one. According to him, "In the long history of religious beliefs, the episode of Year 2 seems like the paroxysmal moment of a crisis which, in its way, was just as profound as that of the Reformation"; Year 2 should be understood as bringing to the surface a long process of dechristianization that can be traced from the middle of the eighteenth century on. Vovelle supports his interpretation with a summary of the extensive research he conducted on people's changing attitudes to religion as evidenced in Provençal wills. His findings were corroborated by Pierre Chaunu for Paris: beginning in the 1750s (as early as the 1720s in Paris), wills no longer include the formulaic expressions of devotion or requests for perpetual masses that used to be the norm. The secularization of wills was accompanied by a decline in Baroque funeral processions: The casket was no longer followed by a procession of penitents or other representatives from the clergy.

However, Vovelle's interpretation is now generally considered outdated. Historiography today argues that the negative impact of the Enlightenment on the Catholic Church and religious practice in France has been greatly overestimated; the Church, on the contrary, fully participated in the contemporary philosophical debate, inside the framework of a Christian Enlightenment. These historians consider the decline in public manifestations of faith as part of an evolution of religious practice toward more intimate, less public forms of worship, and not as a rejection of the Church. Thus, explanations of the episode of dechristianization concentrate mainly on contingent events; indeed, the Catholic Church was to enjoy a revival in the nineteenth century both in France and in the rest of Europe. The English historian John McManners agrees that "the old Christian order," prey to the increasing secularization of society, was undermined during the eighteenth century. Still, he writes, "the cataclysm of the Revolution was decisive." This cataclysm being an unforeseeable, and unforeseen, event (McManners 1998, 117). Another English historian, Nigel Aston, flatly states that, "the break between the Revolution and Christianity – especially the Catholic Church – was essentially contingent, unintelligible without reference to the specific

events and vicissitudes of the Revolution itself" (Aston 2000, xii). French historian Bernard Plongeron goes even further; according to him, at the start of Year 2, "there was no predisposition on the part of the revolutionary authorities to attack Catholicism, let alone to wish to dismantle it" (Plongeron 1997, 373).

In the end, as the American historian Dale Van Kley notes, "The current historiographical emphasis on consensus between Christianity and the Enlightenment thus renders the break between Christianity and the French Revolution yet more problematic" (Van Kley 2003, 1088).

What this short study indicates is that, at the time of the Revolution, a section of the elites was no doubt dechristianized, if not atheist, and so were some members of the popular classes in Paris and in the neighboring departments. These were the people who launched the Cult of Reason and spread it to the rest of the country in the fall of 1793. Should one therefore conclude that France at that time was no longer Christian or underchristianized? In my opinion, Michel Vovelle overestimates the extent of the dechristianization of Year 2. The first measures taken against the Ancien Régime Church certainly resulted from the influence of the radical Enlightenment of the second half of the eighteenth century (how else could one explain them otherwise?), but the dechristianization of Year 2 was launched by only a small minority. The people's undoubted enthusiasm for the revolutionary cults of Year 2 were an expression of support for the Revolution and the Republic more than any rejection of the Catholic religion. The return of Catholic practice in the years that followed, the failure of the *décadaire* cult, and the civic ceremonies of the Directory as well as of Theophilanthropy, and, later, of Saint-Simonism and Comtean atheism under the Empire, the Restauration, and the 1848 revolution, all point to the essentially limited scope of atheism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, ten years of revolution did further and in some cases hasten the secularization of society that had started in the middle of the eighteenth century; the declining numbers of ordinations and the resulting shortage of priests, a weakening participation in religious ceremonies, the Church's loss of influence on social norms already underway before the Revolution, continue today. In that sense the Cult of Reason of Year 2 does signal a distancing, even a separation, from the Church, its dogma, and its discipline on the part of a segment of society. This separation went hand in hand with the propagation of Republican values founded on secular and patriotic principles that still endure in today's France.

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24

Freethinkers, Atheists, and Anticlericals: Spanish American Struggles for Independence

GREGORIO ALONSO

> I fear more an atheist than a wild beast in a forest.
> *Manuel Lorenzo de Vidaurre, Peruvian politician and magistrate, in* Proyecto de un Código Penal, *Lima, 1828, 147*

Works by Stephen Bullivant (2013) and Michael Ruse (2015) have made clear that defining 'atheism' can be a daunting task, given that it implies grappling with what authors understand by religion. In this sense, the following pages are in debt to the insights provided by Talal Asad (1993), Brent Nongbri (2013), and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962). Moreover, in most of the western world the process of secularization, understood as the historical course by which the civic, the economic, the political, and the social realms are separated from any religious subjugation or dependency, was largely absent by the end of the eighteenth century, when this examination starts.

The absence, or major weakness, of atheism in the history of the Hispanic world has seen comparatively little academic consideration (Baroja 1974).[1] The Catholic monarchy successfully invested vast resources to protect a belief system in the Iberian Peninsula, after the expulsion of the Jewish and Muslim populations in 1492 and 1609, and it was also imposed in Africa, America, and Asia for more than three centuries. The imperial crisis and the end of the Spanish domination over the American continent, between 1808 and 1824, did not entail the disappearance of the religious commitment of their inhabitants to Roman Catholicism. On the contrary, a growing body of literature demonstrates that the link between Spanish America and Rome was more enduring than the bond with the metropole. All the fifteen states that emerged in the region during the first half of the nineteenth century, as well as the *madre patria*, consistently declared Roman Catholicism to be the state religion in their constitutions. This chapter provides

1 Julio Caro Baroja's groundbreaking examination was published more than four decades ago. More recent works include Ebenhoch and Österbauer (2015), de la Llosa (2003), Ordoño (2016), and Ojea (2011).

some working hypotheses to help understand why the loyalty showed to the inherited faith proved to be so resilient in the broad Hispanic world during the heyday of national revolutions and expanding citizen freedom. The assumption that liberalism, religious tolerance and eventual secularization of society went historically hand in hand with the rupture of the imperial links seems to be no longer applicable to the Hispanic case. The trend in this region was instead to harness the ecclesiastical institutions installed by the ousted imperial authorities and adapt the religious legacy to the new political needs (Chiaramonte 2010; Maturana 2011). This anomaly, as we will demonstrate in the following pages, was more apparent than real. On the one hand, the comparative feebleness of atheist and deist political thought among the Hispanic elites needs to be reframed. On the other, the terms 'atheist' or 'atheism' acquired a distinctive use in the historical and geopolitical areas this chapter focuses on, and they were far from the current ones.

The Needle in a Haystack: Atheism in the Revolutionary Hispanic Atlantic

According to a 2018 report by the Pew Research Center, in the western hemisphere the importance of the Christian religion is regarded as highest by citizens living in countries located in the Latin American region, with Honduras (94 per cent), Colombia and Peru (80 per cent each) heading the tables (Pew Research Center 2018, 51–3). It is no wonder that a fair share of specialists largely ignore the richness and complexities of religious life in the region and its historical trajectory. On the other hand, however, religious commitment in the former metropole confirms its declining tendency, with only 20 percent of the interviewees regarding religion as 'very important in their lives' (Pew Research Center 2018). This discrepancy can be linked to the traumatic experience of authoritarian national Catholicism and the close identification of the Catholic clergy with the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1939–75).[2] But there are further paradoxes to be explored. The counter-productive legacy of such an alliance can also be felt in Argentina or Uruguay these days, but it does not apply to the Brazilian case, where religiosity is still common and widespread. This chapter aims to disentangle easy associations and revise well-trodden analytical paths in order to add nuance to historical reflections on the religious experiences of the Hispanic peoples and states in the early stages of the age of revolution, to borrow the phrase coined by Eric Hobsbawm (1962).

2 See Brassloff (1998), Callahan (2000), Casanova (2001), and Díaz Burilo (2019). For an alternative approach, see Burrieza Sánchez (2019).

The notion of 'modernity' still carries some currency in contemporary academic production, even when post-structuralist authors have questioned most of its defining traits. For instance, Yale political scientist Steven B. Smith, in a recent work on the *bourgeois* nature of its origins and development, provides a comprehensive definition that resembles the tenets of 1960s modernization theory:

> Modernity came to be associated with the sovereign individual as the unique locus of moral responsibility, the separation of state and civil society as distinct realms of authority, the secularization of society or at least the lessening of the public role of religion, the elevation of science and scientific forms of rationality as the standard for knowledge, and a political regime based on the recognition of rights as the sole basis of its legitimacy.
>
> (Smith 2016, ix)

The need for modernizing societies to ascertain the autonomy of both the state and individuals from ecclesiastical and religious control is thus reinstated. Those were the driving forces behind King Charles III's censorship reforms introduced in 1769 and 1773, which made the state the sole provider of publication licences (Lorenzo and López 2004). Those reforms, which were part and parcel of a wider endeavour to revitalize the role of the Crown in conducting public affairs signalled, according to Catholic champions such as Jaume Balmes, the beginning of modernity in Spain (Sebastián and de Miguel 2004). On the other hand, the transformation of the monarchy generated uproar and violent resistance in Latin America, as many felt that the increased tax pressure, the abolition of the Company of Jesus,[3] and the restriction of the creole elites to high public offices went too far in this rationalizing enterprise (see Fisher et al. 1991; Paquette 2008). There was a spree of uprisings across the American continent during the following decades, which were inspired by the defence of the traditional covenant with the Crown under perceived threat, under the banner of 'Long life to the King, death to the bad Government'. Also ongoing were ethnic conflicts within the empire. The most salient examples of those rebellions were Quito 1765, New Spain 1767–68, Commoners in Nueva Granada 1781, and the Indian rebellions led by Tupac Amaru II and Tupac-Katari in Peru, 1781–2. Those rebellions are better understood in these terms rather than as any prologue to the struggles for national emancipation (McFarlane 1995; Walker 2016; Soriano 2018).

3 According to the traditionalist author Menéndez Pelayo (1992, II, 615), the expulsion of the Jesuits from the American dominions under the Spanish Monarchy was a fundamental reason for their independence.

The leaders of the Spanish American Wars of Independence, certainly a 'modernizing enterprise', did not generally feel decades later any need to abandon the colonial religious traditions and did very little to secularize the emerging states or to make their societies religiously open. Why was that the case? Why did they choose to control the Catholic Church, its wealth, the appointment of bishops and archbishops, and even its ceremonies instead? Some relevant material to address those questions will be provided in the next section. What follows is a cautious reconstruction of the works and deeds of some exceptional individuals who regarded the heavy presence of the Catholic Church and its links with the colonial authorities as a hurdle for Latin American liberation, intellectual progress, and material development.

The reception[4] of Enlightenment values and principles in Latin America thus acquired a distinctive tone and a protective filter from the early stages.[5] According to Leopoldo Zea, in the American territories controlled by the Iberian monarchies there was a clear differentiation between the scientific and philosophical contributions of the new schools of thought, on the one hand, and the protected realm of theological and religious thought, on the other (Zea 1965, 50). The result of such adaptation has recently been labelled as 'Catholic republicanism', a set of doctrines that blended the localistic and urban traditional freedoms enjoyed under the monarchy of Spain, on the one hand, with the unremitting commitment of the new ruling elites to the shared bonds and identity guaranteed by the preservation of the Christian legacy, on the other (Entin 2018).

Historians have shed light on the peculiar features of the reception of the Enlightenment in Catholic countries and the emergence of the anti-Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment in the last decades.[6] It is within this emerging interpretative framework that the notions of atheism or deism can be more effectively understood within the contemporary vocabulary of political analysis, which was heavily informed by erudite elaborations of theological discourse.[7] The six-volume book by Friar Fernando de Ceballos, *La Falsa Filosofía o el Ateísmo*[8] (*False Philosophy or Atheism*) is an

4 Reception is understood here as an 'ongoing flow' beyond teleological assumptions, and transcending linearity and chronology (see Coolahan 2020).

5 An exhaustive literature review is presented by Meléndez and Stolley (2015).

6 See MacMahon (2001) and Rosenblatt (2008). For the Hispanic case, see Viejo Yharrasarri and María Portillo Valdés (2013).

7 There is a suggestion of following lesser figures in this field of analysis in Barnett (2003, 6). Tellingly enough, the Hispanic world is left out of Barnett's monographic study.

8 The full title of the collection is revealing of its main goals: *La Falsa Filosofía, o el Ateísmo, Deísmo, Materialismo, y demás nuevas Sectas convencidas de crimen de Estado contra los Soberanos, y sus Regalías, contra los Magistrados y Potestades legítimas. Se combaten sus máximas sediciosas, y subversivas de toda Sociedad, y aún de la Humanidad.* (*The False Philosophy or Atheism, Deism,*

early example. This Hieronymite theologian provided readers with a comprehensive examination of the historical recurrence of unchristian cultural production in the European and Spanish republic of the letters throughout the centuries, but interpreted it through a distinct political lens. The monarchy and the principles that upheld its sovereign rights to dictate the law and protect God's interests in human affairs had allegedly been their main targets. The new atheists, however, had gone even further and had attacked the Catholic Church, depicted as the main protective wall against heresy and social chaos (Armenteros 2019). This expedient adaptation to modern notions of human rationality and self-emancipation through access to knowledge cast also a shadow over the political lessons learned from the US and French revolutions in the following decades (see Artola Renedo and Calvo Maturana 2017). As it will be shown below, 'atheist' in the Hispanic context would become an insult, a discursive weapon to discredit the political enemy, and even some particularly despised neighbours, rather than an articulate and well-defined school of thought or belief system.

During the age of the Enlightenment, a reinterpretation of the cultural, economic, and strategic significance of the American continent, as well as its links with Europe, was under way. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra convincingly showed the sophisticated nature of those debates, particularly in Mexico (2001). As their European counterparts, the Ibero-American creole elites were wary of the impact of potentially disruptive ideas, especially in a context in which the role and presence of the clergy were key to the preservation of the colonial status quo and had been revamped by the Bourbon reforms and shaken by the impact of the Seven Years Wars and the growing needs of the Royal Treasury (Martínez 2008). The forerunners of the Spanish American Independence Movement constituted a rather varied group to be easily identified with a homogeneous religious label. Most of them were certainly Catholic, with many clergymen among them, but within their ranks there was still a small number of dissenters and freethinkers. One of the first publications that claimed for independence from the Spanish monarchy was written by a former Peruvian Jesuit priest, Juan Pablo Viscardo y Guzmán. As early as 1791, Francisco Miranda, the New Granadine precursor of Latin American independence, published in Paris Viscardo's *Letter to the Spanish Americans* in French and then would publish it in Spanish two years later. Viscardo denounced Spain's 'despotic' domination of the Americas, its poverty and degeneration, relying on the ideas of Montesquieu and Thomas Paine (Brading 1991).

Materialism and some other new Sects convinced of the crime of state against their Sovereigns and their Royal privileges, and against Magistrates and legitimate authorities. This book combats their seditious and subversive maxims against all societies and even Humankind.)

Moreover, the connections between the group of exiled Jesuits in Rome and the emergence of the anti-colonial movements in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has been highlighted in recently published works (Stolley 2007; Racine 2016; Núñez Faraco 2018). However, earlier historiographic essays regarded it as mythical and unsubstantiated.[9]

In the Iberian Peninsula, however, the fight against the excessive power of the Catholic Church and the criticism of the Inquisition went hand in hand. The second half of the eighteenth century saw a new wave of anti-inquisitorial publications both in Spain and abroad.[10] It would mostly be French and British authors who condemned the repressive activities of the tribunal and denounced its extreme power over Spanish people's spirit and thought. Among the seventeenth-century forerunners, there are the poet John Hamilton or the Scottish philosopher John Locke (Cárcel and Martínez 2002). Their books, along with the those by the French *philosophes*, could be found on the shelves of some aristocratic readers in the peninsula even if the Holy Office of the Inquisition was more interested in persecuting religious deviance among more modest sectors of the public.[11] However, the French Revolution led the Catholic monarch Charles IV to use the Inquisition to guarantee the stability of the Crown and struggle against republican and revolutionary ideas. These were early on associated with the decay of the religious grip on people's minds and the use of the term 'atheistic' acquired new currency. The anthropologist Caro Baroja recalled how the term had first been used in Spanish in the early seventeenth century by the leading authors of the so-called 'Golden Age' of literature in Castilian: Miguel de Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Francisco de Quevedo, all of them considered masters of Catholic Counter-Reformation (Caro Baroja 1978, 250).

The staunch Catholicism imposed in the American territories of the Spanish monarchy was embraced by most creole elites during this period (Stolley 2014; Núñez Rivero and Núñez Martínez 2015; Lewis et al. 2019), even if its impact on the socioeconomic development of the region is still being heatedly debated (Jimenez 1999; Parker 2019, 280ff.). Political emancipation from the Crown was no longer envisaged to imply the separation from Rome, though. At least not for one of the earliest and most iconic of its

9 See Batllori (1953). An insightful overview of this debate is given by Peralta Ruíz (2016).

10 See the classic works by Lea (1906–7; 1909). An insightful and mildly polemical view is given by Kamen (1965). In Spanish, see La Parra and Ángeles Casado (2013) and Muñoz Sempere (2008).

11 Practitioners of local history have highlighted how plebeians also produced anticlerical, materialistic, and even theistic utterances, and were duly persecuted by the Inquisition (see González Fernández 2011).

representatives: Francisco de Miranda. He was born in Caracas in 1750, and was a traveller, a polyglot, a reader, and a military officer. He best embodies the multifarious ideological influences in operation in the latter part of the eighteenth century in the Hispanic world, which included freethought (Spell 1935; del Río 1936; Lafarga 1989), rationalism, utilitarianism (Rudan 2007; Barrera 2010), Catholicism and, in many instances, Freemason ideals. Educated in his hometown, Miranda crossed the Atlantic at an early age to acquire in Spain the necessary educational and military training – a trajectory that was much in vogue among the creole elites in the eighteenth century. He joined the army in 1771 and fought in the north of Africa, the Antilles, and the United States, along with the French armies that supported the cause of the US patriots. He would then travel extensively across Europe, enrolled in the French imperial armies under Napoleon, and also spent time in London. Building on an embryonic small group created in Paris in 1797, with the support of the progressive minister Pablo de Olavide,[12] born in Lima, under the name of *Board of Deputies of the Towns and Provinces of South America*, it would be in the city of London that he would participate in the first of the secret societies that supported the cause of political emancipation of the American territories controlled by the Spanish monarchy (de Gandía 1994, 313). In 1798, along with fellow Latin Americans such as Bernardo O'Higgins, Simón Bolívar, José de San Martin, Carlos Maria Alvear, and Tomas Guido, among others, he joined the *Lodge of Rational Knights* or *Grand American Reunion* (Reynolds 1967). The credentials of this grouping as properly Masonic has been subjected to much speculation, whereas their support for the ideas of the Enlightenment and their thirst for Spanish American self-rule remain undisputed (Carnicelli 1970; Bruyère-Ostells 2010; Santiago del Solar 2010). Be what it may, this circle of powerful and well-connected gentlemen gave Miranda the necessary social and political resources, and the informal support of British merchants and politicians to lead the first liberating campaign headed to modern-day Venezuela by a Latin American officer in 1806, the same year Admiral Cochrane tried to conquer Buenos Aires. Both expeditions were unsuccessful, although the lodge carried on organizing political campaigns in search of Latin

12 He was sentenced to jail by the Holy Office of the Inquisition in 1778 for 'reading forbidden books and a lack of respect of holy days'. The court specifically accused him of 'impiety, materialism and heresy' based on his plan for university reforms in Seville (Rawlings 2006, 137). His condemnation provoked scandal as it allegedly stemmed from political revenge against his protector, and alleged fellow freemason, the minister count of Aranda, carried out by the minister Grimaldi (Defourneaux 1959; Hamnett 2017; Hauben 1965). Two decades later, Olavide published *El Evangelio en Triunfo* (*The Triumphant Gospel*) in Valencia (1797–8), where he dismissed his earlier views and labelled himself as a 'disillusioned philosopher'.

American independence. In 1812, José de San Martin would cross the Atlantic in another campaign to Buenos Aires, generously supported by the same people.[13]

The fact that English politicians, and prime ministers-to-be, such as George Canning and Henry Wesley (later Duke of Wellington) were associated with London's Masonic lodges should not therefore come as a surprise (Davies 1996, 634).[14] Closer collaborators of Miranda, such as Lord Holland, Sir Home Popham, and US president Thomas Jefferson were also Freemasons (Racine 2003, 193–5). However, as pointed out by Nial Fergusson in a recent book: 'The history of the Illuminati illustrates the central problem of writing about social networks, especially those that seek to remain secret. Because the subject attracts cranks, it is hard for professional historians to take it seriously' (2017, 35). This chapter does instead take those networks rather seriously as the quantity and quality of evidence support the assumption that the valuable connections established in those circles were key to understanding the foreign involvement and support for the cause of Latin American independence (Codinach 1991). Furthermore, the rivalries between the federalist York and the centralist Scotch lodges would also have a long-lasting impact in the domestic politics of Mexico after the end of Spanish domination (Simon 2017, 201–3, 226–8). Finally, Masonic involvement in Mexican politics would be persistent and a good number of its leaders belonged to the lodges, finally imposing religious freedom under Benito Juárez in the late 1850s (Aragón 2008; Frahm 2015).

By 1800, Latin Americans had been exposed to Masonic activity for decades, with a growing number of pamphlets, books, and agents coming from both Europe and the United States (Vogeley 2013, 139–81). One of the first documented instances of Masonic groupings was the *Arcano Sublime de la Filantropia* (Sublime Arcane of Philanthropy) created in Caracas by the liberator Antonio Nariño y Álvarez, with the support of the Iberian Spaniards and scientists Juan José D'Elhúyar and José Celestino Mutis (García 2016, 107–40). This early collaboration shows that, despite the well-documented British, French, and US Masonic penetration, the main influence came from the Iberian Peninsula. The organization of most lodges and reading societies was carried out by Spanish Americans and Spaniards living in Caracas, Lima, Buenos Aires, and Mexico City. In many cases, the leaders of the cause of Spanish American independence attended the same universities and colleges in Paris and joined Masonic lodges there. That was the case of Vicente Rocafuerte in 1805, when he joined the same lodge as Simón

13 Those links have encouraged speculation as to the ultimate purposes of San Martin and whether he acted as an English agent in the fight against the Spanish Royalist armies in Argentina and Peru. See Bautista Sejean (1997) and Calabrese (2012).

14 An alternative view is given by Oliver (1856, ii).

Bolívar, Carlos Montúfar, and Fernando Toro Rodríguez (Sánchez 2003). Therefore, Catholic propagandists like Vicente de La Fuente blamed Freemasons for the loss of the colonies in the American continent. In his three-volume work on the secret societies in modern Spain, first published in 1870, La Fuente argued that they have been involved in several dark conspiracies and that their ideological leanings and political strategies many years later still linked them to the progressive sections of the political spectrum (La Fuente 1870, 222–4). The fact that the last mortal victim of the Inquisition was the Valencian teacher Cayetano Ripoll in 1825, accused of being a member of a local lodge, speaks loudly about the anti-Masonic hatred that animated the restoration of absolutism in Spain once the revolution was over (Cárcel Ortí 1988, 415–33).

Atheistic Revolutions?

The political window of opportunity for revolution, causing the start of the long imperial crisis threatening Spanish control over continental America, opened in the spring of 1808. With the French invasion of the Iberian Peninsula and the royal abdications of Kings Charles IV and his son Ferdinand VII in favour of Napoleon, Spaniards and Spanish Americans would conduct a six-year campaign of resistance, with the support of their British, Portuguese, and Russian allies (Rodríguez 2012). The opportunity to consolidate some of the reforms introduced in previous years as well as a clear chance to modernize the decaying imperial administration and its societies seemed to be real. The political vacuum left by the absent monarchs would be filled consecutively by the local juntas, the Central Junta, and the Regency, to be then occupied by a Constituent Parliament, or Cortes, gathered in the southern and cosmopolitan town of Cádiz, protected by the British Royal Navy.

Despite the lack of a proper atheistic school in the Spanish public sphere in these years, the term 'atheist' carried some currency in literary and political debates as an insult. The parliamentary debates that started in 1810, with the opening of the Constitutional Cortes by the 'patriots' who resisted the Napoleonic invasion, provided fertile ground for similar intellectual interchanges in the press (Solís 1958). The parliamentary activity that led to the approval of the Constitution in March 1812 was preceded by discussions on the suppression of the tithe, the reduction of the religious orders, and the closing of all those religious houses with fewer than twelve ordained residents. In February 1813, the abolition of the Holy Office of the Inquisition was also approved. The generated press scandals have been duly treated by historians (Callahan 1984; La Parra 1985). One of the lesser known of those polemics involved the economist and politician José

Canga Argüelles and the Augustinian friar Luis Cerezo. Canga published in 1811 an essay in which he made recommendations to the deputies in Cádiz while they were discussing the articles of the Constitution. Influenced by French and British philosophers and political economists, he argued in favour of equality before the law, the abolition of feudal privileges, the promotion of free trade, and the preservation of the Christian faith (García Monerris 1996; 2016). He based his arguments on the notion of the 'social contract', referring to Jean-Jacques Rosseau's 'bright imagination', which he found rooted in the medieval traditions of Castile (Canga Argüelles 1811, 108–11). Cerezo could not be more opposed to Canga's recommendations and condemned his essay using the label of 'atheism', to refer to its suggestions of giving the state control over ecclesiastical affairs and trusting it with the preservation of the Catholic faith. Cerezo also used the term when considering Canga's defence of the freedom of the citizens 'to freely express their views and communicate them to their fellows with no other restrictions than their legal rights'. For Cerezo, 'readers did not need much literature to infer the presence of atheism in this definition of freedom'. He deduced that if the freedom of humankind was not restricted by the protection of 'God's honour', but just by fellow citizens' rights, then 'society does not have a necessary relationship with God. This is Atheism' (Canga Argüelles 1811, 5–6).[15]

The deputies sitting in the Cortes, however, thought otherwise and tried to combine the respect for Catholicism, on the one hand, with the reform of the Church, declaration of national sovereignty, and the introduction of freedom of the press on the other (Larriba and Durán 2012). Even if some of their policies were bitterly rejected by the conservative deputies and even considered 'irreligious', the fact is that the Parliament did not extend freedom of the press to religious matters. Spaniards were granted the right to publish their opinions on any other subject, but their religious views were subject to civil censorship. The decree was ambiguously worded, and its remit included anything related to dogma or the organization of the Catholic Church. It is in this context that it can be clearly seen that religion, as showed by Talal Asad and Brent Nongbri, is a modern concept that acquired its current meanings in opposition to secularist policies carried out by modernizing states. On the other hand, the decision of the Cortes on this occasion was certainly influenced by the need to appease the parliamentary opposition to the introduction of a free press in an empire torn apart by war and political factionalism (Segado 2016, 786).

15 For an analysis on his criticisms of Canga's *contractualism*, see López Alós (2009, 392). Cerezo's Valencian reactionary circle is explored by Pilar Hernando Serra (2015, 212ff.).

The drafting of Article 12 of the Constitution, which was finally approved on 19 March 1812, plainly reflected the compromise reached by the more advanced and the more conservative parliamentary groups.[16] Not only did it make Catholicism the established religion of the imperial state, it also banned the practice of any other in the national territory and declared it the 'only true religion'. However, it also made the civil authorities responsible for its protection. It declared that the public administration was to 'protect it with wise and fair laws'. This declaration of religious intolerance with the sanction and involvement of Parliament disappointed some external observers of the Cortes. For instance, the Sevillian liberal exile in London, and former Catholic priest, José María Blanco White, in his extensive comments on the Constitution, concluded that 'Spanish people must be free in everything but in their conscience' (White 1812, 89). The debates in 1813 on the Inquisition generated even more bitter polemics as the role of the Church in the regulation of Hispanic cultural and political life would be further diminished by its abolition. At least, that was what many clergymen and die-hard believers felt. Without its close inspection, they argue, the press and the impious public writers would produce irreligious literature that would seduce commoners and lead them to eternal damnation (Higueruela del Pino 2002, 61–80). Theological and political condemnations of the decrees approved in the Cortes, especially those affecting the internal organization of the Church, proved to be an excellent platform to unite the diverse factions that opposed them, and the emergence of the so-called *partido servil*, or reactionary faction, in Parliament (Herrero 1971; Alós 2011).

This compromise between religious intolerance, ecclesiastical reformism, and popular participation in politics set the precedent for most of the constitutions approved, and the governmental actions, in the former colonies in the 1810s and 1820s (Annino and Ternavasio 2012; Clavero 2016). The constitutional provisions of the 1814 monarchical Mexican Constitution of Apatzingan, as well as the 1824 republican one, strictly followed the intolerant Spanish trend and declared Catholicism as the state religion (González et al. 2015, 37–58). The Argentine, Chilean, Ecuadorian, and Peruvian constitutions would follow suit and established that Catholicism would be the only tolerated religion in their territories. The new authorities found in the shared religious faith the bedrock upon which they could consolidate their claim to power and the necessary liturgical and ideological ammunition to publicly legitimize the new nation states. Grand Colombia, created by Simón Bolívar in 1821, emerged as an exception to this

16 It reads: 'The religion of the Spanish nation is, and ever shall be, the Catholic Apostolic Roman and only true faith; the State shall, by wise and just laws, protect it and prevent the exercise of any other.'

rule as its articles failed to make any reference to the religious nature of the state and its citizens. However, the closing remarks of its salutation proved to be the perfect combination of the contradictory impulses of early Hispanic liberalism: national sovereignty under the same laws, and freedom as a godly gift so 'all laws must be in full accordance with the maxims and dogmas of the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion, which we all profess and are proud of it. It was the religion of our parents, and it is and will be that of the State.'

On the other hand, however, the new Hispanic American authorities tried to 'co-opt and control the Church' (Lynch 2012, 129ff.). The sale of the Church's lands was an expedient method to balance the Treasury's books, used on both sides of the Atlantic by the new republics and empires (Callahan 1984; Jackson 1997; Jaramillo and Roca 2009). They resorted to the so-called Patronato Regio (royal patronage), a privilege granted by Pope Adrian VI in 1526, which enabled Catholic monarchs to organize the evangelization of the native populations under their rule in the Iberian Peninsula and their colonies. Michael P. Costeloe convincingly demonstrated that the new postcolonial authorities sought to inherit the Patronato and exert powers over the Church, its staff, and properties. He did show that the sustained efforts of the civil authorities to confiscate ecclesiastical lands and control the appointments of bishops were divisive initiatives that often led to violent encounters. Costeloe did indeed characterize the campaign in the three decades after the official declaration of independence in Mexico, in 1821, as 'anticlerical' (Costeloe 1978). Decades later in neighbouring Colombia, as shown by Lina del Castillo, those reforms ran in parallel with the attempt to generate a 'civil religion' that would diminish the Catholic Church's apparent control of the minds and souls of Colombians, and to break 'into its vast economic and political resources' (del Castillo 2018, 262–306, 264).

Meanwhile, the fight for religious tolerance found some isolated advocates both in America and in Spain. Beyond some libels against the Inquisition (Puigblanch 1816; Joaquín de Clararrosa 1820; Llorente 1826), it would be in the 1820s and 1830s when some articles and essays were published in defence of toleration. One of those forerunners was the jurisconsult and Salamanca University professor Ramón Salas. Salas translated into Spanish the *Principles on Civil and Penal Law*, published in Paris in 1823. Salas knew the negative effects of religious intolerance well, as he was persecuted by the Inquisition and imprisoned in its gaols in 1795 due to his use of prohibited books in the classroom. He also translated the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Antoine Destutt de Tracy (Robledo 2013). In his *Lecciones de Derecho Constitucional Público* (Lectures on Public Constitutional Law), the first one of its type and widely acclaimed in the Ibero-American world, he argued in favour of tolerance of all religious cults when he

wondered: 'The Article 12 [of the 1812 Constitution] could not be replaced by another one which would simply state that "all cults will enjoy in Spain the same freedom and protection"?' (Salas, cited La Parra 2014).

Unlike Salas, who advocated for religious tolerance for the sake of fairness and ideological consistency with his liberal principles, the Ecuadorian diplomat and political writer Vicente Rocafuerte defended it on the grounds of political expediency and economic profit. In his famous *Ensayo sobre la tolerancia religiosa* (An essay on religious tolerance), he claimed that the new Spanish American republics must embrace the US example and introduce religious freedom to attract skilful English, German, and Swiss farmers, who would increase the productivity of economic exploitation of the region's abundant natural resources due to their experience and superior knowledge of modern farming and fishing techniques. Moreover, their 'morality, economy, religiosity and submission to the Law' would constitute further advantages for the local governments (Rocafuerte 1831, 63–5).[17] For the Ecuadorian, political independence without politico-spiritual emancipation had little sense:

> What is the gain of the Americas if, after having bravely cut the cord which bonded it to Spain, it remains fastened to the triumphant cart of Rome? Can we call ourselves independent republicans if we are still dependent on a monarch who reigns by the shores of the Tiber? How can we trace the dividing line between the temporal and spiritual powers? (Rocafuerte 1831, 49)

Rocafuerte's and Salas' proposals fell on deaf ears and it took Hispanic American countries some decades to grant their citizens and foreign residents the right to practice other cults. Despite these examples of mild support for religious tolerance, most members of the first generation of Hispanic liberal elites despised atheism and religious freedom, and punished it severely (Klaiber 1988, 98). For example, Jose Lorenzo Vidaurre defined it as a 'religious crime' in his project for a penal code quoted in the citation that opens this chapter (1828, 147–9). Similarly, in Spain, the 1822 penal code in its Article 227 declared that 'Anyone who directly and factually acts to establish in Spain any other religion, or whoever attempts that the Catholic, Apostolic, Roman religion cease being the religion of the Spanish nation will be regarded as a traitor and will be sentenced to the death penalty.' These tensions among those who supported popular participation in politics via regular elections, national sovereignty, and parliamentary rule grew in the following decades on both sides of the Atlantic. The consolidation of materialistic and atheistic trends and schools would take longer to spread in the

17 On Rocafuerte's ecclesiastical policies as President of the Republic of Ecuador, see Fazio Fernández (2006, 156–61).

Hispanic world, though. The religious monopoly granted to the Catholic Church, in morals or public education of children, would only be violently resisted by Spaniards and Mexicans (Ledesma 2001; Solís and Savarino 2014; de la Cueva Merino 2018). Non-confessional education and peaceful detachment from Catholic practices and rituals would be the common strategies chosen by those Hispanic people who felt that Catholicism was unduly over-protected, privileged, and at odds with the modern world.

The development of proper atheistic thought, based on scientific grounds, would only start in the Hispanic world with the arrival of the works by Charles Darwin in the late 1860s. However, in Mexico a young poet and journalist, Juan Ignacio P. Ramírez Calzada, generated a great stir in public opinion when in 1837, aged nineteen, he would declare: 'There is no God: natural beings support themselves,' The youngster, who had been educated in Catholic seminars and colleges in Queretaro and Mexico City, scandalized the audience of the Literary Academy of Saint John of Letran with a discourse in which he openly exposed his following of modern science as opposed to any religious dogmatism concerning the natural world and species.[18] He would then collaborate with Benito Juárez in government in 1861 as Secretary of Justice and Public Instruction, and was a vocal advocate for the rights of the native *indios* (Pereznieto Castro 2018, 11–24). In Spain it would be even later, during the so-called *Glorious Revolution* (1868–74), that the federalist republican, scientist, and medical doctor Josep Suñer Capdevila, would proclaim 'War to God, tuberculosis and kings' (see Sánchez Martínez 1987). If this delay and the perceived unpopularity of atheism need to be accounted for, perhaps the words of Stephen Lebrew can be helpful: 'In other instances, such as in Latin America, religion itself was an emancipative force that united the masses in revolution, quite the opposite role from that which Marx relegated it to. Religion there was indeed the sigh of the oppressed, but hardly the opium of the people' (LeDrew 2016, 35).

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18 His close collaborator, Guillermo Prieto (1906), recalled the anecdote in his autobiography.

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25

Marx and Marxisms

ANDREW MCKINNON

Karl Marx's atheism is well known, even if his criticism of religion has more often than not been misconstrued. The distortions to his critical theory of religion stem from common misperceptions of the philosophical, political, and cultural context in which key statements on religion were formulated – and exacerbated by interpretations of his work that trade in anachronisms. The subsequent history of Marxism's attitude to religion (and Marxism's reading of Marx's texts on religion) has itself been shaped by the different contexts in which Marxism has been either a revolutionary social movement, or a state ideology in which atheism has become part of the Marxist confession of faith. Marx's atheism is multifaceted; some aspects are relatively banal, others appear either antiquated or naive; the criticism of religion formed at the nexus of his politics and dialectical thinking continue to provide a stimulating starting point and sounding board for thinking about religion today.

Marx's 'everyday atheism' (Trzebiatowska 2018) is beyond question. Marx was the product of a highly secular household, his father having converted from Judaism to Lutheranism to allow him to fulfil his political and career aspirations. There is not much to suggest that Marx ever subscribed to belief in a god or gods; if he did, it is clear that these beliefs were lightly held and of little consequence. In this, his religious socialization and youthful orientation had nothing in common with his comrade and supporter Friedrich Engels, nor with the other great nineteenth-century atheist, Friedrich Nietzsche. Despite their deep differences, both Friedrichs were similar in their reaction to a faith that was intimately known. For a time, both Friedrichs were the pious products of devout protestant households. Their own subsequent rejections of religious faith bears all of the scars of a religious upbringing and its subsequent rejection. Marx never had any such crisis of faith; his atheism is political and philosophical rather than experiential.

Marx was nevertheless somewhat reluctant to identify himself as an atheist. As he explained at one point, '*[a]theism*, as the denial of this unreality, no longer has

any meaning, for atheism is a *negation of God*, and postulates the *existence of man* through this negation; but socialism as socialism no longer stands in any need of such a mediation' (Marx and Engels 1975, XII, 306). Atheism is only meaningful in opposition to the theism against which it is a reaction; this makes it an unnecessary term seen in the positive light of communism. The idea that socialism is not born of reaction, and needs no opposites (like capitalism, or the rule of the bourgeoisie), would certainly find its critics. Nietzsche, for example, saw socialism, and the Christianity from which he thought it springs, as equally reactive. In both the Left Hegelian movement, out of which Marx's thinking develops, and in the later history of Marxist interpretation of religion, it is difficult not to see evidence of reactivity, even if it is arguably less the case with Marx himself.

This chapter first addresses three of the common anachronisms that have undermined readers' attempts to understand Marx's critique of religion as necessary preparation for fuller consideration of Marx's atheism, its antecedents, and developments. It then attends to Marx's developing thought in the context of post-Hegelian criticisms of 'The Christian State' before looking at Marx's most significant essay on religion in 'Towards a critique of Hegel's philosophy of right: introduction' (1843–4). The chapter then briefly considers Engels' approach to religion, and the development of Marxist critiques of religion where it has been a social movement and a state ideology.

Misconceptions about Religion and Atheism in the Reception of Marx

Marx in fact wrote relatively little about religion, which is perhaps surprising for a writer who is one of the nineteenth century's best known (and most prolific) atheists. His only well-developed writing about religion is found in his essays of the key transitional period in the middle of the 1840s. Of these, 'Towards a critique of Hegel's philosophy of right: introduction' ([1844] 1977, 63–74) particularly stands out, and even here (as in the companion piece, 'On the Jewish question' ([1844] 1977, 39–62) he is primarily interested in making a point in the Hegelian and post-Hegelian debates about, and critiques of, the Prussian state. Even here, however, religion is little more than a sideline. From the 1850s on we find no more than occasional (even if often astute) observations – above all about the institutionalized hypocrisy of Christian Churches. We also continue to hear echoes of his encounters with the atheist Left Hegelian theologians of his youth. Their analyses continue to provide him with tools for thinking about political economy and the communist project. Religion and its rejection is for the most part relegated to the footnotes.

Marx's writings on religion of the 1840s have themselves often been misinterpreted in conjunction with a threefold anachronism. First, Marx is often taken to be simply repeating the Left Hegelian critique of religion, or alternately, providing an analysis that he could have only produced following his later studies in political economy. By contrast to each of these tendencies, it is important to recognize that the period of Marx's writings on religion was a key transitional one in both his intellectual development and his political commitments, a pivot point between his early Left Hegelian, radical democratic politics and his self-conscious communism.

The 'Left Hegelians' were by and large democrats opposed to the self-justification of the 'Christian state'; this was the ideology that supported Prussian absolutism (Breckman 1999). This critique is Marx's jumping-off point for his critical theory of religion, as well as providing the philosophical terms of reference as he shifts from radical republicanism to making a moral commitment to 'communism' in 1843–4. The writings of 1843–4 are also the moment where Marx most clearly signals his break with his erstwhile teacher, the atheist theologian (and renowned anti-Semite) Bruno Bauer, siding much more decisively with Ludwig Feuerbach, another atheist theologian. It was Feuerbach who gave Marx the notion of alienation, and with it, a more constructive view of religion compared with that of Bauer (Stedman Jones 2017, 210). Even here, however, cracks that show signs of Marx's rift with Feuerbach are already becoming visible (McLellan 1969, 113–16). Marx's discomfort with Feuerbach's abstractions are already evident, as is his sense of the limitations of (intellectual) critique as a means of praxis. So Marx cannot be taken to be simply repeating any one particular Left Hegelian view. An adequate interpretation needs to take account of his differences, as well as areas of agreement, particularly with Feuerbach.

Second, subsequent interpreters have at the same time very often plastered over the uneven surfaces of Marx's thinking on religion in 1844 by importing later thinking into his texts of 1844. Thereby Marx's thinking on religion gets harmonized with a later, more developed and generally much better understood system of thought. Particularly frequent in this respect are references to Marx's notion of ideology, which was not even part of Marx's theoretical vocabulary until his collaboration with Engels in the spring of 1846. Also frequent are references to the so-called base–superstructure model, whereby thought (or culture), including religion, is an epiphenomenal by-product of the relations of production. However tenuous the evidence for such a 'base–superstructure model', even in Marx's later theory, it is present here only in the imagination of readers who insert what they understand of Marx's later writings into this text. Marx's studies in political economy came well after his

major writings on religion; the terms of political economy play no part in Marx's understanding of religion in 1843–4.

Finally, contemporary readers of Marx have very often understood Marx's famous metaphor, 'religion is . . . the opium of the people', in terms completely anachronistic – even impossible – for the mid-1840s. In the early nineteenth century, opium was not seen as a substance that relieved pain without addressing the cause of the pain; by contrast, it was widely considered effective as treatment for many different ailments, including cholera (and some evidence suggests it was not ineffective in the cholera epidemics that ravaged the continent in the early nineteenth century). Marx himself used opium (along with other substances, the health-promotion of which we would question today, such as creosote and arsenic) in his attempts to treat his painful carbuncles. Opium was likewise not understood as being addictive; the concept of addiction still needed to be invented. Over-use of opium was typically cast in moral, rather than medical terms. Finally, opium was not seen as creating a distorted picture of reality, even if its capacity for stimulating vivid – sometimes bucolic and sometimes terrifying – day-dreams was well known. On the other hand, there were growing, but still not well articulated, public health concerns about the use of opium-based medicines for children, including fears that laudanum was becoming a liquid babysitter for working-class children while their mothers put in long days working in the factories. Opium was undoubtedly seen as a soporific, but even as it induced sleep it was a source of enormous profit that provoked conflict (the Opium Wars) – a dialectical irony that was not lost on Marx. Opium provides a complex and contradictory metaphor for a phenomenon that Marx understood in terms of its contradictions.

Marx Among the "Young Hegelians"

Marx's break with the Young Hegelians is sometimes seen as a shift from theology to politics. In fact the critical theologians and philosophers of the movement had already become intensely 'political' as religion had become increasingly integrated into the state apparatus at the restoration of the monarchy in 1815, and even more so following the ascension of Frederick William IV to the throne in 1840 (Breckman 1999). Those Hegelians who had already come to the position that Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, published in 1821, was incompatible with the constitutional monarchy that it presumed to support became increasingly radicalized. One of the markers of the group we now see as 'Left' Hegelians is that they are the group that had come to see Hegel's theorizing of freedom as more compatible with a republic than with a constitutional monarchy.

Frederick William IV, his ministers, and his advisers increasingly pushed the Prussian state towards a self-understanding as a 'Christian state'. While Hegel undoubtedly saw the modern secular state as the instantiation of Christian values, Frederick William took it as the role of the crown to define and enforce 'orthodox' positions in the churches, the university, and the press. Particular effort went into defending the notion of a 'personal' god who reigned on high, as the necessary corollary to the person of the monarch who reigns on earth. Hegel and most of his followers, with their notion of 'absolute spirit', tended at the very least to shy away from descriptions of God that would satisfy the requisites of orthodoxy, and only a thin line separated many of them from pantheism. This placed a mark of suspicion on the heads of most Hegelians, not only those typified as 'left' or 'young' (Stedman Jones 2017, 96–7).

Bruno Bauer was a biblical scholar and follower of Hegel who had spent much of the 1830s trying to reconcile his understanding of Hegel's philosophy with Christian theology. David Strauss' *Life of Jesus* (1835–6), had cleared the start of the path that Bauer's biblical scholarship would follow, even if Bauer was initially extremely critical of Strauss' work. Bauer's writing became increasingly radical in content and tone, though some of his ideas, like the priority of the Gospel of Mark, have since become commonplace among biblical scholars (Rosen 1977, 85–108).

The seeds of Bauer's radical republicanism may have been planted as early as 1839 (McLellan 1969, 49). Even this, however, seems to have been spurred on by political interferences in theological controversies. Karl van Altstein, Minister of Education, Health, and Religious Affairs (a convinced rationalist who had been responsible for Hegel's appointment to the University of Berlin in 1818), moved Bauer to the University of Bonn in an attempt to steer him clear of political controversies in Berlin. In 1840, Altstein and Friedrich William III both died and Friedrich William IV embarked upon a programme of conservative religious policies. To make matters worse, Bauer clearly did not get on with his colleagues in theology at Bonn, where Pietism was in ascendance. These were all tributaries to the flood which would sweep Bauer from university employment in 1842. Thereafter his intellectual positions became ever more militant (Moggach 2003, 63–5; Stedman Jones 2017, 90–1).

We can see the development of Bauer's atheism along two different streams, one theological and a further set of reasons stemming from the political reaction to religious deviation, though they increasingly seem to converge. Bauer's theological reasons stem from the encounter of his reading of Hegel on the one hand, and of the Bible and religious history on the other. Thus, as Douglas Moggach (2003, 60) explains, for Bauer the essence of

contemporary religious consciousness is 'a hubristic particularism, which also confers a transcendent status on the universal, as a separate realm, divorced from concrete social life, and inaccessible to genuine individual efforts. It is not an acquisition, but a gift, arbitrary and irrational.'

To Bauer's Hegelian mind, religion reflected the historical development of reason and self-consciousness. Christianity was now Hegel's unhappy consciousness, not absolute religion. Christian thinkers now seek 'to subordinate reason to one earlier moment of its development, with all the incompleteness and particularity that still clothe the principle. Criticism, on the contrary, can reveal both the meaning and limitations of previous forms' (Moggach 2003, 69).

Bauer's increasingly inseparable theological and political radicalism mirror the interpenetration of the church and the restoration state, where the power of the state enforces the subordination of thought to a former stage in the development of reason. But with this comes an advantage for criticism, as Bauer put it, somewhat apocalyptically: 'The hostile powers are now arrayed so closely together', he wrote, 'that a single blow will decide' (quoted in Moggach 2003, 66).

While Bauer is undoubtedly still an influence on Marx's thinking in 1843, Marx's extremely hostile review of Bauer's work 'On the Jewish question' is ample indication of a divergence between the two thinkers. This also comes through very clearly in 'Towards a critique of Hegel's philosophy of right: introduction'. There are a number of reasons for Marx's newfound hostility to Bauer's thinking: a friendship that had gone sour, their politics had begun to diverge, and Marx was increasingly falling under the spell of Ludwig Feuerbach's atheist theological anthropology.

Especially compared with Bauer, Feuerbach is a much more subtle, perceptive, and largely sympathetic critic of the religious imagination; he developed his comprehension of human species-being beginning with the study of what he referred to as theology's 'secret anthropology'. Much as Marx's encounter with Feuerbach left a profound and lasting mark, their approaches were always different. Even if Marx and Feuerbach each came to understand themselves as 'materialists' (Feuerbach, not Marx, had been the first to 'turn Hegel on his head'), they cast their materialisms of a different substance. Marx's is the materialism of socio-political-economic existence, and Feuerbach's is formed out of the human species' essence and its place in nature.

Feuerbach's thinking, as we find it in his remarkable book The *Essence of Christianity* of 1841, played an almost inestimable role in Marx's intellectual development. In 1844 Marx wrote to Feuerbach confessing of his 'love' (though they had never met), and explaining that, whether intentionally or

not, Feuerbach had laid the philosophical foundations for communism (Marx 1977, 113). Feuerbach's theory of religion forms the basis of Marx's theory of alienation. Rather than religion representing the discarded shell of a previous stage in the development of reason (as for Bauer), for Feuerbach religion represents the best of the human species, as a species. Reflecting on religion provides the means for understanding all that is best about human species-being, allowing self-consciousness that isn't yet fully aware that it is the object of its own thinking, feeling, and willing. Thus, humans project onto God the essence of their own species, as a species; criticism allows humanity to reclaim its own essence through self-consciousness.

Humanity on earth comes to know itself through the images that humans project onto God in the heavens. And yet, Feuerbach argues, such knowledge is incomplete and one-sided because humanity makes a category mistake by thinking that the predicates used to describe God in fact pertain to something or someone beyond themselves. The attributes of God need to be reclaimed by and for humanity. This is the beginning of the notion of alienation as Marx will develop it, even if Marx will later complain that Feuerbach's critique that reattributes God's character to human beings is merely contemplative or mystical. Human life, Marx contends, and the revolution required to overcome the state of alienation, is concrete and practical. As Marx writes in the most famous of the 'Theses on Feuerbach' (written in 1845, published only after his death), 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it' (Marx 1977, 158).

While Feuerbach's self-consciousness is the self-consciousness of the species and not the individual, the social is not well theorized in his work. This is why Herbert Marcuse rightly detects Marx's return to Hegel, even at the moment that he is at his most enthusiastic about Feuerbach, from 1843 to 1845 (Marcuse 1983, 271). Feuerbach moves freely between the individual and the species, omitting entirely the social relations that mediate the two. Self-consciousness gained is not individual self-knowledge, but knowledge of the species and its essence. The individual may, however, benefit from coming to understand infinite and immortal as predicates of the human species (living on as individuals die), and come thereby to make peace with their own finitude. This emphasis on human 'nature' rubbed Marx the wrong way from the start, even as he was taken with the idea of species-being; ultimately, Marx sees Feuerbach's attention to nature as the very antithesis of politics. In Marx's view, in 1843, politics is where the action is. He only begins dabbling in political economy late in 1844, once well settled in Paris, and becomes serious about educating himself about economics beginning in 1845.

The Pivot of 1843: 'Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'

'Towards a critique' is Marx's most substantial engagement with the question of religion, and also the locus of his famous metaphor of religion as the 'opium of the people'. Most of the preparatory reading for the text, along with that of 'On the Jewish question,' was done and notes sketched in Bad Kreuznach, during Karl and Jenny's stay of several months there from the middle of March 1843. This sojourn followed their wedding in the parish church, and immediately preceded their departure for Paris (Stedman Jones 2017, 124–9). The text was subsequently written in the late autumn of the same year in Paris, where, with Arnold Ruge, Marx had ambitious plans for the new publication, the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*. Both articles were published in that periodical (McLellan 1973, 87–8).

Marx and Ruge had envisioned the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* as a publication that would bring together German-speaking and French-speaking radicals, and the publication was originally intended to be bilingual. Marx was clearly taken aback by the attitude of working-class radicals in Paris towards what German intellectuals referred to as *die Gretchenfrage* (after Goethe's *Faust*): where do you stand on the question of religion? The criticism of religion was a given for the Young Hegelians, for whom, as Marx will put it in 'Towards a critique', 'the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism'. Unfortunately, Marx and Ruge were to soon discover that it was impossible to get French contributors, in large part because Parisian radicals did not want to be associated with 'German atheism'. Radical republicans and socialists alike very often saw themselves as a part of a movement continuous with, rather than opposed to, Christianity, the French Revolution having come to be understood as a moment in redemption history. Gareth Stedman Jones notes: 'disconcertingly for the Germans, Louis Blanc declared that the left were the true defenders of Christianity against the scorn of Louis Philippe and the Orléanists, the new "Voltairean" ruling class. Not surprising, therefore, that replacing Christianity by a humanist creed held little appeal for the French' (2017, 149). The French communists had positioned themselves, to use Marx's phrase, as 'the spirit of a spiritless situation'.

The development of Marx's political critique of religion is intimately related to his new commitment to 'communism' and his emerging understanding of the working class as protagonist in the construction of a new society. Marx's encounter with communist ideas (overwhelmingly of French origin) had begun in Bonn, where he had read Louis Blanc and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in Moses Hess' reading group. Blanc's book was particularly important for the elaboration

of the idea of communism, but even more so for the role Blanc assigns to the proletariat as the progressive historical force. It was not until he arrived in Paris that Marx had come into sustained contact with working-class communists and had expanded his understanding of socialist ideas out of those encounters. In Paris he began to develop a dialectical understanding of social change in which the propertyless classes are the ones who have the capacity to bring about a society without property (and hence classes); these ideas are extensively worked through in his famous notebooks of 1844 (McLellan 1973, 97; Stedman Jones 2017, 137–40).

The proletariat begins to assume a central role in Marx's thinking about sociopolitical change, and his thinking becomes increasingly social, but in most other respects his theory still looks broadly like that of his Left Hegelian colleagues, even as he begins to distance himself from his understanding of their idealism. While Marx never explicitly refers to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, implicitly it is present everywhere. In particular, we find an account of the dialectics of the proletarian and bourgeois that is strikingly reminiscent of Hegel's story of the Master and Slave. Marx argues that it is only because of its exploitation that the proletariat embodies the potential to transform itself, and with it the whole set of social relations that make up 'this society'. For Marx, when the proletariat demands 'the negation of private property' (1977, 73), it declares the secret of its own existence, both as the essence of this society, and of the new communist society. The proletariat dialectically overcomes its status as propertyless through the abolition of private property, thereby abolishing the proletariat itself, and making propertylessness into something very different. In the conclusion to 'Towards a critique' (Marx 1977, 73), Marx points to a similar dialectical relationship between philosophy and the proletariat. Philosophy finds in the proletariat its material weapons, and the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy. He continues: 'Philosophy cannot realize itself without transcending [*Aufhebung*] the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend [*aufheben*] itself without realizing philosophy' (Marx 1977, 73).

Aufheben, the verb used for the self-transformation of the proletariat, is a Hegelian keyword that is notoriously hard to translate. It can mean opposite things: to take up or keep, to cancel, or abolish. In Hegelian and post-Hegelian philosophy it most often carries both implications – it points to a contradiction between two countervailing ideas, tendencies, or forces that must be resolved by a synthesis. Engels gives a good rough and ready explanation of '*Aufhebung*' when he explains that it means '"Overcome and Preserved"; overcome as regards form, and preserved as real content' (Marx and Engels 1975, XXV, 129). Even if Engels' grasp of Hegelian dialectics is often a bit clunky, this is a good starting point for thinking about the term.

There are three senses in which the form of Feuerbach's work needed to be overcome in order to preserve the real content. First, Marx observes that Feuerbach's religious anthropology is essentially asocial: 'Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations' (Marx 1977, 157). Second, Marx considers the form of Feuerbach's inquiries essentially theological, even if his conclusions are atheistic. In his view, assertions about the existence or non-existence of God are an essentially theological conversation; Marx hopes to move the discussion beyond the theological to what he understands as the political. For Marx in 1843, the political questions themselves are far more important than the question of whether God exists or not (even if he clearly thinks not). Finally, Marx argues that Feuerbach's work is essentially speculative and, in the end, fundamentally idealist (even though Feuerbach saw himself as a radical materialist). He thought that if humanity could come to the right intellectual conclusions about God – that he is a projection of our own human powers – we will inevitably begin to re-appropriate those alienated powers for ourselves. Marx may not be right in his understanding of Feuerbach, but it is clear that Marx is convinced that thought is not sufficient to change the world: he has become convinced that a revolution is required. He has definitively left behind Bauer's notion that 'theory is the strongest form of practical activity' (quoted in Stedman Jones 2017, 99).

For Marx, the criticism of religion, although 'essentially finished' (Marx 1977, 64) is not an end in itself; it is rather simply a starting point for addressing other, in his view, more important, questions. Marx takes post-Hegelian criticism, particularly that of Feuerbach, and turns it into an action-oriented critique of the social world. If the conclusion of the Young Hegelians is that 'man is the highest being for man' (69), then the 'categorical imperative' as far as Marx is concerned, is 'to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being' (69). The point of Marx's essay is not that 'Man makes religion, religion does not make man' (this was the view of both Bauer and Feuerbach, among most of the Young Hegelians). Feuerbach's philosophy becomes a premise or an 'assumption' (*Voraussetzung*) as starting point from which Marx begins. Atheism is not, in and of itself, the communist position, since Marx wants to move beyond theological questions altogether (and he sees the question of atheism as a kind of negative theology). Bauer, by the end of his life, was still an avowed atheist (and a truly rabid anti-Semite), but he had abandoned his radical republican democratic politics altogether and become an influential adviser to the Kaiser.

For stylistic reasons, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish quotations, summary, and ironic response to another author from Marx's own analysis, a problem which has often led readers of Marx's critique of Bauer in 'On the Jewish question' to conclude that Marx was an anti-Semite. As David McLellan (1969, 75–7) has shown, the arguments for Marx's anti-Semitism depend on reading 'On the Jewish question' in isolation from Bauer's text that Marx is subjecting to critique. Readers have often come up against similar problems separating Marx's social and political analysis of religion from Feuerbach's psychological and theological argument that Marx is struggling to overcome dialectically.

Marx's summary of Feuerbach takes up the first three paragraphs of the essay and Marx's own analysis of religion begins in the fourth. There, Marx writes:

> Religious suffering is at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people.
>
> The [*Aufhebung*] of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions of their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusion. The criticism of religion is therefore the germ of the criticism of the valley of tears whose halo is religion.
>
> Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chains not so that man may throw away the chains without any imagination or comfort, but so that he may throw away the chains and pluck living flowers. The criticism of religion disillusions man so that he may think, act, and fashion his own reality as a disillusioned man comes to his sense; so that he may revolve around himself as his real sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.
>
> (1977, 64; translation amended, emphasis original)

These passages begin with an essentially dialectical logic. Religious suffering is both 'expression of' and 'protest against' real suffering, both of which Marx highlights by underlining. Sergio Rojo writes,

> The characteristic of the definition which Marx gives to the two terms 'expression of real suffering and protest and against real suffering' constitutes a dialectical relation, an unstable equilibrium, which mutually influence each other, even if, historically, one aspect has prevailed over the other.
>
> (1988, 210; my translation)

For Marx, however, unlike for Feuerbach, religion is by no means an 'abstract' expression of the human essence. As far as Marx is concerned, the

human being has no 'essence', but the human being is constituted in the context of the social relations into which he or she is embedded. Expanding on the 'expression', he highlights the social dimension by writing that religion is the spirit and heart of a spiritless, heartless social situation; religion is a sigh that bears witness to oppression. Even if there is no textual evidence to prove it, these lines are certainly evocative of the more positive view of religion that Marx encountered among working-class communists, socialists, and republicans in Paris. While religion was an 'expression' of suffering for Feuerbach (though not social and political suffering, poverty and oppression), it is by no means a 'protest' against that suffering (especially its sociopolitical causes).

Marx underlines *expression*, *protest*, and *opium*, suggesting that 'opium' embodies the contradiction between expression and protest. Opium, then, is the moment of negation of form and affirmation of content. The Orthodox Marxist readings of religion as 'opium of the people' neglects both this dialectical movement, in which opium, as a condensed signifier, brings together both expression and protest in one moment. Marx's use of this metaphor forces us to look at it dialectically: opium/religion as both expression and protest.

Readers seldom stop to think about what Marx means when he writes that religion is the 'opium of the people', because it seems quite obvious: religion is an addictive painkiller that distorts our perception of reality. Such an understanding would have been quite foreign in Marx's context. Opium was an important medicine (one Marx used himself (McLellan 1973, 337)), but it was also used as a means of infant-doping. It was the source of wild visions of another world (Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1813) and De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821)), but also a major commodity and an important source of tax revenue for the British Empire. It was sometimes used for inducing sleep, but it was the cause of two international conflicts referred to as the Opium Wars, the first of which had just ended in 1842. The irony was not lost on Marx when he wrote that 'the occasion of [the second] outbreak has unquestionably been afforded by the English canon forcing upon China that soporific drug called opium' (Marx and Engels 1975, XII, 93). Far from being a simple metaphor about the role of religion in society, it embodies the contradictions that Marx sees at the heart of religion, as *expression of*, and *protest against* real misery.

Later Echoes of the Critique of the 'Critical Critics'

Marx wrote little about religion, beyond occasional comments or even asides and footnotes in other works, after 1844. Although these are typically negative (and often with reference to the hypocrisy of religious institutions), it is

questionable whether it would even be possible to reconstruct a systematic sociology of religion from these fragments. Ideology increasingly becomes the umbrella term under which Marx addresses all symbolic phenomena, and one could argue that religion is best treated under this analytic rubric. This is a concept that derives from his thinking about religion and the Left Hegelians, and that continues to be prominent in his thinking. To the extent, however, that religion becomes an instance of ideology, the question of the existence or otherwise of god or the gods is even less important. The gods' existence becomes subordinate to the analysis of how particular beliefs and ideas (religious, just as non-religious), in particular contexts (this state, this society) aid and abet the exercise of power and exploitation – or help to challenge relations of domination. Whatever else is underdeveloped, it is clear that if we treat religion as ideology, it must continue to be treated as a contradictory phenomenon – not simply as an 'expression' of class suffering (or interests), but also as a protest against an exploitative situation. Thus, an analysis of ideology that can only discuss the use of beliefs and ideas in the service of domination, but not in the resistance to domination, is lopsided and inadequate, missing out entirely on the spirit of Marxist dialectical critique.

Marx's critique of Feuerbach is, in large part, that Feuerbach starts from religion, treating religious concepts and themes as metaphors that can provide insight into the operations of 'this state, this society'. This is what, for Marx, made Feuerbach a theologian, however much he denied the gods' existence. At his most positivistic, Marx sometimes comes across as somewhat naive about the possibility of always taking an unmediated route to comprehension of 'this world', uncorrupted or distorted by any other spheres of discourse. It is certainly clear that Marx did not live up to his own expectations of Feuerbach, however. When, at key moments in Marx's thinking, he grapples with a difficult problem when he struggles with formulating new conceptions adequate to comprehension of the world, he often resorts to using religious metaphors as tools. Most famous of these moments is undoubtedly Marx's analysis of 'the fetishism of commodities'. Marx understands the mysterious power of the commodity, made by the worker, and then becoming a god that stands over and against its creator. In what has become one of the most influential passages for scholars, Marxist or not, trying to understand the cultural consequences of a capitalist society, Marx writes:

> A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those

> properties are the product of human labour. It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was. (Marx 1977, 435)

Here, Marx returns to just the mode of analysis for which he had criticized Feuerbach, beginning with theological discourse as a means of understanding something as 'trivial' and mundane as the commodity, but he reproduces the logic of Feuerbach's theory of alienation. This also shows the Left Hegelian, as well as Marx's own thinking, as a distant product of the biblical tradition, approached from the starting point of Hegel's dialectics. The fetishism of commodities has very clear echoes of the story of the idol-maker in the book of Isaiah, on which Bruno Bauer had lectured at the University of Berlin, with Marx in attendance. A worker makes an idol of human form; from the woodchips left over from the idol, he makes a fire and warms himself, cooking his lunch over the flames. When he is done, he turns to the idol 'he bows down to it, worships it; he prays to it and cries "Save me, for you are my god!"' (Isaiah 44:9–18; New Jewish Publication Society translation).

Religion and Marx's Atheism in Marxist Thought

Marx's long-time collaborator, Friedrich Engels, wrote much more about religion than did Marx, even if on occasion it is his analysis that seems a bit wooden. Unlike many later Marxist writers, Engels does not presume that serfs are more religious than aristocrats, and proletarians more devout than the bourgeoisie. Orthodox Marxist approaches, following the standard understanding of 'the opium of the people' have typically assumed that religion induces quiescence particularly in those who have nothing to lose but their chains. This has often become the starting point of a Marxist theory of religion. However, such approaches have been dogged by a fairly embarrassing empirical problem. Available historical and sociological evidence strongly suggests that, in Europe and America at least, the working class has long been less religious than the bourgeoisie (cf. McLeod 1997).

Engels' work is often much more empirical than any of Marx's analyses, and this is particularly the case in Engels' insightful and influential study of the peasant

revolts of the sixteenth century (Marx and Engels 1975, X; Boer 2012). That book does not argue that religion necessarily makes people quiescent, nor does it assume that the lower orders are more prone to religious piety. Rather, Engels looks at what kind of religiosity different classes and class fractions tend to produce and adhere to. Engels provides a fairly compelling descriptive analysis of the various strands of the Reformation in terms of their class locations. For Engels, however, religion is in the last instance nothing more than a reflection of the ideals and hopes of particular social classes. In other words, his analysis of religion and social class is in the last instance fairly narrowly reductionist: beliefs are produced by class relations; religion is simply the 'clothing' that covered class interests. Engels thus set a tone for 'scientific socialism' that reduced religion to the effect of class oppression and conflict, which would be the dominant mode of Marxist criticism, particularly in the 'east', over the course of the twentieth century.

Even if it is too simple to see religious belief as the product of its class location of the believer, it is undoubtedly true that all ideas are produced, maintained, and contested in the context of particular social, political, and economic relations. This is the broader point of the notion of ideology, which demands of us that we understand ideas in relation to power – how they challenge or reinforce relations of domination. This applies every bit as much, of course, to Marxist ideas about religion as much as it does to religion itself. As we have seen, the Young Hegelian critique of religion is inseparable (with the partial exception of Feuerbach) from the critique of personalism, from the way certain ideas about the person of God were used as ideological supports for the reestablishment of Prussian absolutism after 1815, and especially after 1840. The atheist criticism that Marx treated as 'the premise of all criticism' was not well received by Parisian radicals, who saw their movement as defending spirit in a spiritless situation, as they opposed 'Louis Philippe and the Orléanists, the new "Voltairean" ruling class' (Stedman Jones 2017, 149).

In his *General Theory of Secularization* (1978), David Martin showed that different political arrangements built different paths for the process of secularization. Militant anticlericalism and political atheism have most often arisen where established religions gave ideological support to the state in return for policing religious heterodoxy. Marxist communism, as it developed into a revolutionary social movement, was likewise shaped by its opposition to institutions and groups that opposed its goals. This was particularly the case in Russia at the time of the Revolution, where the Orthodox Church had long intertwined itself with the state apparatus, playing a role in the ideological state apparatus. Max Weber noted this general tendency for

orthodoxy, referring to its dominant mode of relating the religious and the political as 'caesaropapism'.

Following the Russian Revolution, the Church was disestablished in 1918, and, with Stalin's rise from 1924, actively and often aggressively persecuted (Lane 1978). The attitude of those who built the Soviet Union towards religion was undoubtedly shaped in the context in which the Orthodox Church had been powerful, allied with the tsar and elites of the Russian Empire. Marx's own views on using the police and other mechanisms of power to forcibly eradicate religion (which, for example, he opposed in his critique of the Gotha programme (1977, 564–70)) have very often been ignored by regimes claiming inspiration from Marx's programme of social transformation.

Through its role in sponsoring and promoting Marxist thinking worldwide, the Soviet ideological state apparatus exported and promoted a particular version of Marxist thought, often referred to as 'Orthodox Marxism'. This included a view on the religion question forged in the crucible of the Russian Revolution. Soviet propaganda included the direction and sponsorship of translations of Marx's and Engels' writings on religion. Such translations supported the Orthodox Marxist views of religion and the essential place of atheism in the construction of the new socialist humanity. Thus, for example, in 'Towards a critique of Hegel's philosophy of right: introduction', the key dialectical keyword of the text discussed earlier, *aufheben*, when it is used in reference to religion, is consistently translated as 'to abolish' (consistent with Stalinist policies), whereas when it is being used in reference to philosophy or the proletariat, an effort is made to ensure that the contradictory senses of the verb are clear. Soviet-sponsored translations of Marx, in particular, need to be read with caution, nowhere more than when the subject of the text involves religion.

In other contexts, where Marxism has been the ideology of a revolutionary social movement, the inevitability of Marxist atheism has varied, even where revolutionaries were sometimes sponsored and supported by Moscow. In what was then known as the Third World, views on religion more shaped out of the life experiences of the poor and working class, and reflecting differently organized configurations of religion and political power, have come to reflect the concreteness that Marx had argued the Young Hegelians had neglected. Marxism itself has clearly been a product of the relations of 'this state, this society'. Sometimes a synthesis of religious belief and practice has come to the fore, most obviously in the movement that became known as 'Liberation Theology'. Often these have sought to recover a Marx more sympathetic to their religiously inspired socialism than the one promoted by Moscow.

Conclusion

Even though Marx wrote relatively little about religion, and less still specifically about atheism, the interpretation of his thought on these themes had enormous political influence over the course of the twentieth century. Marx's political atheism attempted to get beyond the reactive approach to religion that was the predominant tendency (excepting Feuerbach) among the Left Hegelians. Nevertheless, Marxism's approach to religion was shaped in the crucible of the Russian Revolution, where the Orthodox Church had a powerful role as a part of the ideological state apparatus under the tsars. As for many years the globally dominant communist state, the Soviet Union's promotion of a certain form of political atheism, based on a certain interpretation of Marx's texts, had a widespread impact. This included, crucially, the sponsorship of both scholarship and canonical translations. Nevertheless, bearing this influence in mind, careful attention to Marx's own texts can continue to provide inspiration and a starting point for a more nuanced interpretation of a contradictory phenomenon like religion, without itself succumbing to the allure of dogma.

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26

Nineteenth-Century Russia

VICTORIA FREDE

Introduction

In this chapter, atheism is treated as the acceptance of the proposition that God does not exist. In Imperial Russia, where piety remained a powerful social and political norm well into the nineteenth century, individuals who accepted this proposition were forced to contend with three entangled problems. One was the relationship between piety and morality: the possibility of articulating secular norms of good and evil and of behaving according to such norms in the absence of faith in God and the afterlife. Denying God's existence hence entailed asserting one's capacity to set oneself rules. A second recurring theme was the denial of God's status as a providential being, creator of the natural world, whose will structures human destinies. In Russia, the assertion that God does not exist was also an assertion of the power of the individual to shape his or her own fate, or to cast aside the concept of fate altogether. Third, in an autocratic state, which claimed God's will and authority as the central foundation of monarchical power, denying God's existence was also viewed as an act of political subversion. In the second half of the nineteenth century, atheism became a core component in the worldview of many revolutionaries.

Taken in combination, these three preoccupations, with moral norms, human power, and state authority, distinguished articulations of atheism in Imperial Russia from those produced in France, Germany, and Britain during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In western Europe, theology reigned as the queen of the sciences well into the nineteenth century; consequently, even secular intellectuals were well trained to debate the status of the Old and New Testaments as divine revelation, the nature of the Holy Trinity, or the truth content of Christian narratives, such as God's capacity to effect miracles. In Russia, where theological training of secular literati was far more limited, and the overall political and cultural authority of the Orthodox

Church was considerably weaker, such disputes remained secondary to individuals who expressed doubts about the existence of God or denied it outright.

Autocratic Politics, Theology, and the Orthodox Church

Reforms, initiated by Peter the Great (r. 1682–1725) in the early eighteenth century and carried forward by his successors, substantially reduced the wealth, prestige, and political clout of the Orthodox Church. Over the course of the eighteenth century, some monasteries were stripped of their lands, funding for theological academies and seminaries remained limited, and the priestly estate was transformed into a hereditary caste, accorded a decidedly secondary rank to the nobility (Freeze 1977). The comparative weakness of the Orthodox Church meant it could not discipline noblemen and noblewomen to abide by theological doctrine. Nor was theology a subject of study and instruction at the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg and University of Moscow, established in 1724 and 1755, respectively.

If eighteenth-century church reforms undermined the power and prestige of the Orthodox clergy, however, Orthodox faith remained a lynchpin of the ideology of autocracy, even during the secularizing reigns of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great (r. 1762–96). God stood at the top of a hierarchy that all members of the Russian state and society were to serve; liturgy played a central role in the theater of power that emanated from St. Petersburg and Moscow across the Russian provinces. The importance accorded to Orthodox piety as a foundation of autocracy increased over the course of the nineteenth century, as did institutional support for the theological training of clergymen. Beginning in the late 1810s, emperors Alexander I (r. 1801–25) and Nicholas I (r. 1825–55) made displays of faith, their submission to God's will, and their roles as guardians of Orthodox faith central to their policies and pronouncements. Both equated political obedience, including loyalty to the emperor, with faith in God. This ideology was vigorously promoted at educational institutions. In the 1820s, theology became a mandatory topic at Russian universities, and this curriculum, offered by appointed members of the clerical estate, strongly emphasized the centrality of Christian faith to personal morality, which could not be maintained without love and fear of God and acceptance of Scripture as Holy Writ. Russia's prelates became increasingly active in publishing sermons, textbooks, and treatises. Indeed, the Bible itself was translated and printed for

the first time in Russian (as opposed to Church Slavonic). These publications were positively received by the nobility, though infighting among both Orthodox prelates and statesmen weakened the resonance of their messages (Batalden 2013, chs. 1–3).

Changes to the educational curriculum under Alexander I and Nicholas I, combined with vigorous assertions that religious faith entailed political acquiescence, placed new pressures on intellectuals who were critical of specific policies these emperors promoted, the emperors themselves, or of the social and political systems they represented, notably autocracy and serfdom. During the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, some, including Orthodox intellectuals who came to be known as Slavophiles, looked to older traditions to redefine Orthodox faith, but others came to doubt the God and the Orthodox traditions that appeared to underwrite Russian state policy. It was only in the 1840s, however, that individuals explicitly made their disbelief in the existence of God known to others, and only in the early 1860s that such disbelief manifested itself in Russian print.

The Russian Enlightenment

The program of westernization initiated by Peter I in the early eighteenth century created a highly cosmopolitan Russian noble elite. By the late 1750s, many noblemen were fluent in French and German. Diplomatic postings took them to Paris, London, Vienna, or Berlin, where they attended literary salons, the theater, Masonic lodges, hobnobbed with professors and literati, and bought crateloads of books and artistic works, which they shipped back to Russia. Some of the most prominent, like Ivan Shuvalov, corresponded with Voltaire, as would Catherine II, who came to power in 1762. Numerous young noblemen were sent to study abroad, largely in Germany and Switzerland.

The many philosophical tracts, plays, and journals that made their way to Russia included radical anticlerical works, especially those by Voltaire, as well as atheistic treatises by d'Holbach and Helvétius, including *The Sacred Contagion* (1768) and *Christianity Unveiled* (1766). The wide circulation of Voltaire's works, plays such as *Zaïre* (1732) and the "Poem on Natural Religion" (1756), which acknowledged the existence of God as creator of the natural world, while also asserting that God had been misrepresented in Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions, indicates that some members of the nobility sympathized with deism. Translations of works by deists and even atheists, both in manuscript and in print, provide valuable clues as to what

was read (Luppol 1935; Shakhnovich 1950; Persits 1959). Yet, translations tended to feature extensive excisions, suggesting that there were limits to the anti-religious zeal of eighteenth-century Russian literati. Such was the case with Ekaterina Dashkova's rendition of a section of Helvétius' *On Mind* (*De l'esprit*, 1758), published in a Russian journal in 1763, which bore no trace of its atheistic implications. Some translators even added words and sentences to lend them an air of compatibility with Christianity (Frede 2014, 126–7). Nevertheless, the existence and circulation of such works helped create the impression that Russia's westernized elites were indifferent, if not hostile, to organized religion (Raeff 1966, 150).

As Enlightenment treatises entered Russia in large numbers, so too did works by the likes of Hugo Grotius or Johann Franz Buddeus, demonstrating the existence of God against putative atheist detractors. Treatises attacking works by d'Holbach and Voltaire, too, were imported, such as Nicolas-Joseph Selis' *Innoculation of Good Sense* (1761) and Abbé Claude-François Nonnotte's *Errors of Voltaire* (1767). Today, they would be labeled as belonging to the "counter-Enlightenment" (McMahon 2001), though readers at the time are unlikely to have thought in such categories. The arguments contained in such works were frequently replicated in Russian sermons, secular poetry, essays, plays, and autobiographies. Russia's literary elites, from the prominent – notably Alexander Sumarokov, Mikhail Kheraskov, and Denis Fonivizin – to the obscure, took pains to distance themselves from "godlessness" or "unbelief" and to assert their faith in God. The vast majority of literate Russians would, therefore, first encounter atheism, the proposition that God does not exist, through Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and non-denominational refutations. In Russia, most of these centered on the claim that individual morality could not be maintained without faith in God, fear of God's judgment, and belief in the afterlife. Unbelief could only lead to depravity, which would undermine the family, society, and the state itself (Frede 2014, 133–9). These claims, repeated in the Russian press during the nineteenth century, and amplified by emperors and their administrators, would need to be addressed by atheists once they made their existence known.

German Idealism and the Debate Over Providence

Open debate about the existence of God was slow to emerge among literate Russians. The terms of the debate would be defined by arguments over the implications of German Idealist philosophy, not in disputes for or against the

finer points of Orthodox theology. The contents of such arguments hinged on divine providence, transposed into the secular terms of the philosophy of history. Ironically, the notion that German Idealism held profound implications for religious faith was driven home to young intellectuals by Russian state officials.

Nowhere was the impact of state ideology more fraught than at Russia's universities. Since the mid-eighteenth century, foreign experts had been invited to study and teach law, medicine, language, philosophy, and natural science in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and later at Kazan and Kharkov Universities, founded by Alexander I in 1804. Lectures in philosophy offered a structured means by which inquiring young noblemen could construct their own interpretations of the relationship between God and the natural world. Such explorations appeared safe because professors continually emphasized the compatibility of reason and faith. When state officials intervened to emphasize the un-Orthodox implications of western philosophy, they unwittingly elicited opposition, both to Orthodoxy and to the state. By the 1810s, German Idealism had gained substantial traction, promoted by well-regarded professors such as Johann Schad, Mikhail Pavlov, Ivan Davydov, and Alexander Galich, who lectured variously on Kant, Fichte, and Schelling. Still, state officials, especially in the Ministry of Education, grew increasingly suspicious of Idealism, which they represented as a source of religious doubt, skepticism, atheism, moral depravity, and political radicalism. Professors who lectured on Idealism were attacked, demoted, and in some cases fired (Koyré 1929, chs. 2–3).

Official hostility toward foreign intellectual trends was further entrenched after December 1825, when upon the death of Alexander I a group of noble officers and state officials launched a failed coup d'état in order to replace autocracy with a constitutional monarchy or republic. The Decembrist uprising failed, and Nicholas I, who now ascended the throne, duly emphasized their debts to western philosophy as he and his supporters sought to discredit them. Casting them as children of a foreign (godless) tradition, Nicholas I and his advisors thereby reaffirmed the marriage between state and church, political loyalty and faith in God.

State pronouncements and interventions in university curricula were intended to buttress unquestioning Orthodox faith among university graduates, but they appear also to have prompted greater soul-searching and philosophical exploration in certain quarters. In the mid-1820s, one group of young Muscovite poets and prose writers, self-styled "Wisdom Lovers," embraced Schelling's nature philosophy and came to advocate doubt as

a method of religious and philosophical discovery. The best-known were Vladimir Odoevskii, Dmitrii Venevitinov, Ivan Kireevsky, Aleksei Khomiakov, and Stepan Shevyrev (Koyré 1929, chs, 1, 4; Frede 2011, ch. 2). While several came to embrace Orthodoxy in the 1830s, becoming noted "Slavophiles," their earlier publications and theorization of doubt inspired a younger group who became known as "Westernizers," graduates of Moscow University who were attracted to Fichte, Schelling, and, later, Hegel.

Schelling and Hegel endowed the Westernizers of the 1830s with a secular language to debate the notion of providence. Nikolai Stankevich, Vissarion Belinsky, Mikhail Bakunin, Alexander Herzen, and Nikolai Ogarev all came to embrace a philosophy of history positing infinite potential for philosophical, moral, spiritual, social, and political progress. The end would be the full reconciliation of spirit and nature, creating a harmonious society free of poverty and pain. Given the strictures of censorship, Belinsky, Herzen, and Ogarev variously turned to literary criticism, fiction, and poetry to convey these truths to a wider audience. "Yes, it will come," Belinsky promised, "this time of the kingdom of God, when there will be no poor and no rich, no slave, no master, neither the faithful nor the faithless, neither law nor crime . . . when the disharmony of individual consciousness resolves in a single full harmony of common consciousness" (unsurprisingly, this line was cut by the censors [Randolph 2007, 222]). Westernizers saw their own role as "priests of truth" who could help bring this world into being, both by alerting others of the ends they must strive toward but also to their current place in a so-far imperfect world.

If Idealism endowed Westernizers with a secular narrative of mission, however, it also lent them tools to undermine that narrative. In the early 1840s, most, if not all Westernizers, began to express doubts about providence. There might be a spirit, organizing principle, or divine being who organized events in the world and directed them toward a better outcome. Yet, the underlying plan was difficult to discern amid the chaos of the present, and suffering in the here and now was hard to justify in the name of a better future. Again, their views were echoed in published writings, but their reflections and debates were best captured in their correspondence, where the problem of providence and doubts about the "beyond" were expressed in highly personalized terms. The circle of participants in oral and written exchanges was wide, including Natalia Herzen, Alexander Herzen's wife, who in 1843 proclaimed herself a "skeptic" and soon came to disavow faith in a providential scheme that lent meaning to the here and now, and in the

afterlife, the immortality of the soul. Even so, group members hesitated to deny God's existence outright. The first to issue an explicit denial was a relative outsider, Vasilii Botkin, the son of a wealthy Moscow tea merchant who had befriended Belinsky in the mid-1830s. Visiting Paris in 1845, where he joined other Westernizers in debates about "God, the immortality of the soul, and the social movement," Botkin began to argue against the existence of God. He explained his position in a letter to Ogarev, tying his "sincere negation of so-called God" to his recognition of "the pathetic lot of the human being, subject to the arbitrariness of force and coincidence" – that is, he tied rejection of God to the rejection of providence (Frede 2011, 74–5, 83–4). Though Botkin did not enter into greater detail, he did mention one philosophical source for his new ideas – Left Hegelianism.

Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1841) became a core text in the development of atheism in Russia, from the 1840s through the early twentieth century. Feuerbach argued that the Christian God was a projection of human essence onto a being of humans' own invention. Belief in providence was the faith in "a power to which all things stand at command," a will forceful enough to "interrupt the course of necessity, the iron bond which inevitably binds effects to causes." Belief in God was an act of faith in a being who cared about human happiness, human salvation, whose interventions affirmed the "infinite value" of human existence (Feuerbach 1957, 103, 105). It was not only human suffering that prompted faith in such a being, but "human feeling," the sense that it "is pleasanter to be passive than to act, to be redeemed and made free by another than to free oneself." The savior, Jesus Christ, the "God-man," incorporated the divine in human form, as the fulfillment of all human wants, imagination, joy, and suffering (Feuerbach 1957, 140–1, 148–9). Only by denying God could humanity overcome its impotence, recover its own true essence, affirm its own value, and extend to itself the right kind of care.

These arguments left deep traces in the writings of Westernizers in the 1840s, including Bakunin (Uglik 2010), but they also rapidly spread outward. In St. Petersburg, a clandestine translation of *The Religion of the Future*, a popularization of Feuerbach's ideas by his brother, Friedrich, circulated among a group of young merchants, who would be swept up in the famous Petrashevsky affair, in which Fyodor Dostoevsky, too, was implicated and condemned (Frede 2011, ch. 3). Feuerbach's ideas proved even more influential for the generation of writers who came to the fore from the mid-1850s to early 1860s, including Nikolai Chernyshevsky (Paperno 1988, 196–8). They continued to resonate strongly through the beginning of the twentieth

century. The unremitting emphasis in official ideology on the monarch's divinely anointed status encouraged revolutionaries to assert that Russians did not need a tsar who claimed to provide for his subjects from on high. Those subjects must assert the value of their existence, without waiting for some external force to improve their lot. Revolutionaries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, inspired by "Godmanhood," believed that human potential was in fact infinite, and that by denying God, humans could indeed transform nature to achieve salvation on earth.

The Impact of Natural Science and Crass Materialism

Beginning in the late 1850s, educated Russians who wished to disprove the existence of God would turn to discoveries in the natural sciences to support their position. In so doing, they capitalized on the growing politicization of university instruction and research to posit that science and religious belief addressed the same fundamental problems but stood at loggerheads. Scholars and literati had long felt that experiments in biology, physics, chemistry, and astronomy yielded insights relevant to the study of philosophy. Herzen, himself holding a degree from the Department of Physical and Mathematical Sciences at Moscow University, championed this view in the 1830s and 1840s (Vucinich 1963, 290–4; Kelly 2016, 81–7, 174–80, 212–20). Still, it was only in the mid- to late 1850s, that educated Russians would formulate proofs against the existence of God and immortality of the soul using evidence drawn from natural science, specifically physiology. Their activities were made possible by the temporary relaxation of censorship in the early reign of Alexander II (r. 1855–81).

Four journalists most commonly associated with this style of argumentation were Chernyshevsky, Nikolai Dobroliubov, Maksim Antonovich, and Dmitrii Pisarev, who rose to prominence after 1855. All four drew inspiration from writings by German "crass materialists," Carl Vogt, Ludwig Büchner, and Jacob Moleschott, whose polemical works of the early 1850s sought to eject God from accounts of creation and the operation of the natural world. Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov, and Antonovich were especially intent on discoveries in physiology that accounted for the operations of the nervous system and brain, challenging religious doctrines concerning the existence of an immortal soul and free will (Todes 1981, 23–40; Frede 2010, 72–9). That these three were interested in countering the teachings of the Orthodox Church regarding the soul and immortality is attributable to their social and

educational background: all were sons of clergymen whose primary and secondary schooling had taken place in seminaries. "Popovichi," priests' sons, were an increasingly visible constituency in the burgeoning intelligentsia. Simultaneously, the number and quality of Orthodox theological journals and treatises was increasing, and these steadily attacked materialism (Michelson 2017, 104–12).

In the early 1860s, a new generation of Russian natural scientists emerged, trained in laboratories in Germany and France and offering their own contributions to physiology. Most famous was Ivan Sechenov, whose "Reflexes of the Brain" (1863), emerging out of careful laboratory research on the nervous system in animals, lent new weight to materialists' claims against the existence of an incorporeal soul. Sechenov, too, would be targeted by censors and the conservative press for his putative attacks on Christian morality (Vucinich 1970, 124, 126; Todes 1981, ch. 5).

By contrast, the appearance of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), translated into Russian in 1864, initially drew a more muted response from Orthodox critics. As Daniel Todes explained, "Russia lacked an entrenched creationist tradition and had already produced a number of evolutionists" (Todes 1989, 23). True, some commentators remarked that it undermined belief in species as divinely created (Pisarev 2003, 9, 12); critics noted that Darwin's work raised troubling questions about the first forms of life and their origins, of "primary" and "secondary" causes, and that it "denied the role of a supreme intelligence in upholding the harmony and inner order of nature" (Vucinich 1988, 22, 46, 100, 102). More virulent, however, was the public debate that unfolded between radicals, on the one hand, and religiously minded critics, on the other, over the implications of the struggle for existence and natural selection for humans, as these appeared to favor individualism and competition over communitarianism and cooperation (Todes 1989, ch. 2). Lasting for decades, this debate would pit some of Russia's best-known writers, such as Lev Tolstoy, against some of its most prominent scientists, such as Kliment Timiriazev, who debated whether intra-species competition stood at odds with the religious and moral commandment to love and aid one's neighbor (Timiriazev 1894, 34–40). Underpinning these quarrels was the wider disagreement over whether natural science could in any way guide individuals' ethical decision-making.

Radicals argued that it was necessary to bring social mores and ethical systems of judgment into accord with the most recent findings in natural science. Again, Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov set the tone, blending arguments from physiology with utilitarian ethics to offer a secular

explanation of decision-making, one independent of the notion of free will: Humans are naturally designed to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. Though they used the word "egoism" to describe their theory, both presented their ethics as endorsing, rather than undermining, civic engagement: the highest good was one that benefited the maximum number of people, and the highest pleasure was achieved by working toward it (Woehrlin 1971, 130–6). Chernyshevsky encapsulated these ideas in the highly influential novel, *What Is To Be Done?*, which he wrote while imprisoned in 1862 and 1863. While the novel did not explicitly argue against the existence of God, it did offer a secular code of ethics for young men and women – the "new people" – to structure their mutual interactions and their efforts to reform society. By identifying two of the male protagonists as budding medical students, Chernyshevsky invited readers to conclude that science held the keys to the formulation of a new social morality. Many contemporaries believed – mistakenly – that Chernyshevsky had based one of his protagonists on Ivan Sechenov and the heroine, Vera Pavlovna, on Sechenov's mistress and later wife, Maria Obrucheva-Bokova, herself a medical student (Paperno 1988, 133–5). Passing censorship, the novel unexpectedly became enormously influential. Chernyshevsky was banned from further publication and sentenced to exile with penal labor in Siberia, while Dobroliubov had already succumbed to tuberculosis in 1861.

Over the next decade, the utilitarian ethics of Chernyshevsky and Dobroliubov came to be characterized as a form of "nihilism," a term adopted by some radicals, including Pisarev, who argued that all principles must be discarded as outworn rags. Their views should not be conflated. To Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov, and their followers, including most revolutionaries, concepts such as freedom, justice, and equality remained valuable guides to structuring one's judgment of the past, present, and future.

Nihilism and Dostoevsky's Critique

It was Ivan Turgenev who popularized the term "nihilist" in his famous novel, *Fathers and Children* (1862). Ostensibly, nihilists were radicals of the 1860s generation who repudiated any kind of principle or concept that might be used to judge or guide individual behavior. This included such terms as "good" and "evil," and even more neutral-sounding concepts, including "science" itself. The underlying problem, namely that words and directives are poor at capturing the real needs and moral dilemmas facing individuals, had troubled Turgenev himself, together with Herzen in the mid- to late

1840s (Kelly 1998). While most radicals repudiated Turgenev's novel and its protagonist, Bazarov, the young journalist Dmitrii Pisarev proudly adopted the label. At the height of his nihilism, from 1861 to 1864, Pisarev argued that all abstractions were harmful inventions, even beauty and justice. These ruled over the individual's mind like phantasms, dictating alien modes of behavior and belief. Though Pisarev could not name the Christian God among these phantasms, the implication was overt. Individuals must liberate themselves of socially and culturally imposed norms, discarding all authorities – parental, educational, scientific, and religious. They must also rid themselves of the belief in organizing principles that structure human history, or values toward which society should collectively aspire. Instead, individuals must learn to make judgments and decisions on the basis of their own experiences, preferences, and dispositions (Pozefsky 2003, 35–37, 60; Frede 2011, ch. 6).

Though most radicals rejected the label "nihilist," the term stuck, applied indiscriminately to all revolutionaries of the 1860s generation. Turgenev and more conservative Russian novelists such as Nikolai Leskov continued to represent radicals as atheists, hostile to social mores and devoid of moral principles (Moser 1964). Yet, it was Dostoevsky who created the canonic image of atheists in Russian literature, most notably in his novels *The Possessed* (or *Demons*, 1871–2) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–80), in which he recurred to the problems of providence and morality. The rejection of providence is a primary concern for Kirillov, an atheist contemplating suicide in *The Possessed*: "If there is God, then the will is all his, and I cannot get out of his will. If not, the will is all mine, and it is my duty to proclaim my self-will." To Kirillov, the ultimate assertion of self-will, or self-determination, is to end his life. This act is, to him, an intervention in world history. Humans had invented God in order to refrain from suicide: Kirillov wishes to opt out of this program, and thereby prove that he stands above history. This is the highest assertion of freedom, the clearest assertion of "self-will" (Dostoevsky 2000, 617–18). The act of suicide also entails an assertion of one's freedom from physical necessity, the fear of death. By transcending his physical limits, the limits of fear, man – specifically Kirillov – will deify himself, and by becoming a man-God, once and for all prove God's non-being. In so doing, he will create a new order of human beings, with new and more powerful physical attributes (Dostoevsky 2000, 114–16).

The same act, suicide, was also the ultimate rebellion against Christian morality (Paperno 1997, 143–6, 160). Overcoming God, for Kirillov, also means transcending the categories of morality, overcoming one's awareness that one is bad, to accept the fundamental goodness of all that exists, even

acts of evil (Dostoevsky 2000, 237). In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky linked unbelief to immorality on a single hinge, encapsulated in the view attributed to the atheist, Ivan Karamazov, that without faith in the immortality of the soul and in God, "everything [is] permitted," even the most outrageous deeds (Dostoevsky 1990, 69–70). In *The Possessed*, revolutionaries, embodied by Stepan Verkhovensky, abuse the seeming novelty and perverse logic of their bold ideas to influence and manipulate others. Their lust for power becomes an end in itself, one that is destructive for humanity (Paperno 1988, 202).

Dostoevsky's representation of Russia's atheistic nihilists, those who rejected any moral categories whatsoever, was a great departure from the nihilistic worldview that Pisarev had articulated. In Pisarev's view, the rejection of societal mores, including categories of good and evil, would shore up the integrity of individuals, their ability to live and act in the world. In Dostoevsky's fiction, this act of negation could only lead to moral and physical annihilation. Pisarev could not respond to Dostoevsky's criticisms: recently released from prison, he drowned to death in 1868.

Atheism among Russian Revolutionaries

Whether one turned to the radical or conservative press, atheism had been established as a concomitant feature of political and moral "liberation" in the early 1860s, and it remained a central tenet for many of Russia's revolutionaries from that time on. Though Alexander II came to power in 1855, inaugurating sweeping changes, including the relaxation of censorship, greater autonomy for universities, legal reforms, and, most critically, the emancipation of the serfs, young radicals had already come to question the capacity of an autocratic state to reform itself and to set society on an egalitarian path. To them, nothing short of the emperor's abdication in favor of a republican government would suffice. The emancipation of the serfs, when it was inaugurated in 1861, did little to restore their confidence in the autocrat and his bureaucracy, as its terms, granting little land to peasant farmers, were considered miserly and did little to alter hierarchies of power in state and society. Many awaited a revolution from below, a peasant uprising, that would sweep the nobility, its military, and the emperor from power.

To many, rejection of faith in God was a necessary precondition for revolution, among the nascent intelligentsia, the educated elites who populated Russia's universities, and the peasant majority. The Russian people would not abandon faith in the tsar until they had cast off faith in God,

a paternal figure whose providential care would eventually manifest itself, either in the next life, or in this world, with the second coming of Christ. It was relatively easy to spread this message to educated youths at Russian universities, secondary schools (gimnazii), and religious seminaries. Revolutionaries translated and printed works by Feuerbach, Büchner, and Ernest Renan in London and clandestine presses in Russia. By the end of the nineteenth century, such treatises had spread into the most distant corners of the empire, read not only in seminaries, but at madrasas as well (Ross 2015, 85–6). Conveying their message to peasants in the countryside and workers in urban areas, by contrast, continued to pose unique challenges. Lengthy treatises would be impenetrable to their illiterate or semi-literate audiences, while verbal delivery brought the significant risk of denunciation and arrest.

Challenging the faith of peasants posed another significant dilemma. For decades, Russian literati, including Belinsky and Herzen, had debated the Slavophiles over the degree of peasants' commitment to Orthodox piety and submission to the Orthodox Church (Malia 1961, 282–89, 407). As Belinsky exclaimed in his 1847 letter to Gogol: "According to you the Russian people are the most religious in the world. That is a lie! The basis of religious feeling is pietism, reverence and the fear of God. But the Russian speaks the name of God while scratching his behind" (Belinsky 1987, 132–3). Most members of the intelligentsia remained convinced, however, that faith in God and the saints remained strong among the working masses, so strong that overt advocacy for atheism would prove counter-productive, undercutting their trust in the intelligentsia. Early pamphleteers, former seminary students in the Russian provinces, took the risk, composing and disseminating short broadsheets in 1862 and 1863 that encouraged independence of mind and self-reliance among peasants, challenging "superstitions" and urging readers to stop "comforting yourselves with nonsense" (Frede 2011, 171–3). The majority of revolutionaries, however, were more cautious, instead choosing to couch their messages in Orthodox vocabulary, emphasizing egalitarian messages in the New Testament, and drawing on the language of apocalypse, a cataclysmic struggle between the forces of light and darkness that would destroy a moribund order and establish justice and equality among the people.

Revolutionaries turned to educational initiatives, including the "Sunday school" movement of the 1860s and 1870s to spread their messages to workers in urban areas. Very few included outright denials of the existence of God, together with socialist views, in their lessons (Zelnik 1994, 55, 64, 70). As Reginald Zelnik has argued, most continued to fear that overtly atheistic messages would antagonize their students, even if some deemed anticlerical

remarks (attacks on priests and monks) permissible. Courses in natural sciences, touching on physiology, geology, and physics, they hoped, might lead students to draw their own conclusions (Zelnik 1994, 69, 71, 74). These methods became firmly established in the early 1880s, as intelligentsia teachers set great store by the lessons they offered in astronomy and biology, especially Darwin's evolutionary theory (Pearl 1999, 59–62).

These same dilemmas were encountered by participants in the "To the People!" movement of the mid-1870s, when over 1000 young populists ventured into the countryside to foment revolution. Some would prevaricate on their lack of religious belief, while others attempted cautiously to dissuade peasants of their "superstitions." The boldest, perhaps, was Alexander Malikov, who argued in Feuerbachian tones that humans would never recognize their own needs until they had dispensed with faith in God, while a just society could not be created until they recognized their own divine potential. Only love could reconcile members of society with one another, creating equality and justice by non-violent means, a fact not recognized by Christians, who continued to project love onto God (Solov'ev 1998, 29, 33–4).

Marxism began to spread in Russia in the 1880s, yet as late as the 1900s some revolutionary Marxists remained convinced that they must work with, rather than against, the religious dispositions of workers. So-called "God-Builders," including Anatolii Lunacharsky, Maksim Gorkii, and Alexander Bogdanov argued that the revolution could reforge the proletariat into "new people" who would collectively draw on their strengths, mastering nature, to overcome humanity's physical limitations. A new proletarian culture would forge a new "religion without God," drawing on the power of faith to mobilize workers (Kline 1968, ch. 4; Read 1979, 77–94; Poliakov 1999, 58). Putting theory into action, they founded a workers' school on the island of Capri and in Bologna, where they recruited workers from Russia to attend classes on history, economics, religion, and art (Scherrer 1978). Their ideas were angrily countered by Vladimir Lenin, an ardent materialist, who argued that all religious vocabulary most be expunged from the socialist lexicon. Religion was a product of human impotence in the face of nature, and it could not be used in any shape or form to the benefit of working classes. Indeed, it would put "class struggle to sleep." Even Lenin, however, hesitated to make atheism part of the program of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, believing it would detract unnecessarily from party unity among workers (Krausz 2015, 131–4). In this matter, as in so many others, Lenin's position carried the day, and God-Builders would recant their views, so that the movement had all but disappeared by October 1917.

Surveying the revolutionary terrain prior to the October Revolution, a number of prominent writers would critique the atheist intelligentsia for its fanaticism. As Sergei Bulgakov and others argued in the famous compendium, *Signposts* (1909), revolutionaries had themselves become trapped in a Manichean worldview. Their simple-minded doctrines obviated the need for any deep reflection on morality or the value of human life. Worse still, they drew their self-image from concepts that they had adopted unthinkingly from religion. Battling the state, and arrested and executed in large numbers, they had come to view themselves as selfless martyrs for a higher cause. Prideful of their ascetic renunciation of worldly pleasures, they inverted religious narratives and denied God, only to deify themselves, convincing themselves that "they were the 'man-God' of the post-religious world to come." For these arguments, Bulgakov and others were heavily indebted to Dostoevsky's characterization of radical atheists in *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed* (Michelson 2017, 199, 201; Read 1979, 108–14). Reframed in Nikolai Berdyaev's writings, such as *The Russian Idea* (1946), these views became highly influential among opponents of communism in the twentieth century.

In the Soviet Union, by contrast, historians worked to recreate an atheistic tradition in Russia, tracing it back to the late eighteenth century, if not before. Their scholarship was not only most numerous, but also, archivally, the most robust, based on exhaustive searches of the manuscript and published record, which was most easily accessible in the Soviet Union itself. The fact that so few documents denying the existence of God could be found prior to the mid-nineteenth century was understandably attributed by Soviet scholars to censorship and intimidation. Silence was no sign of acquiescence. The secret police, which operated under various names, including the "Secret Chancellery" and "Third Section," had worked to ensure that dissenters from the Orthodox faith, largely sectarians, but also "blasphemers" were arrested, interrogated, and exiled, often to prison monasteries (Grekulov 1929; 1964; Gernet 1941, 164, 169–73; 1946, 416–20; Persits 1950). Simultaneously, scholars worked to establish an intelligentsia lineage that was anti-autocratic, anticlerical, materialist, and socialist. Numerous important writers, poets, and literary critics would be folded into a pantheon, most notably Alexander Pushkin, Belinsky, Herzen, and Chernyshevsky, who all became waystations in a materialist trajectory leading to Lenin himself. Along the way, Soviet scholars lost sight of the very radicalism entailed in the statement that "God does not exist," one which, in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, could lead to societal ostracization, a penalty no less daunting than state prosecution.

Conclusions

In the eyes of their contemporaries, whether of the nobility or peasantry, God was not an abstract entity, defined by theological propositions, but an omniscient being whose will structured the political and social order. Those individuals who denied God needed to assert their unwillingness to abide by their neighbors' daily habits and rituals, such as fasting and prayer, and their refusal to participate in the socially established ethical order of moral norms. Such persons needed to invent a secular ethics and demonstrate their ability to live by these new norms. The energy generated in their intellectual efforts was largely what made atheism so compelling in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

For the last two decades, the historiography of Imperial Russia has recognized the multi-ethnic and multi-religious status of the empire. How the non-Orthodox population, including Jews, Muslims, and sectarians, responded to the challenges articulated by Russian atheists, or how and whether the question of the existence of God might have emerged from within their own communities prior to the Bolshevik seizure of power, is a problem awaiting further exploration.

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27

Secularism and Humanism

DAVID NASH

The nineteenth century is the first century in which definitions circumvented the globe, promoting discussion of their helpfulness in describing the universe that humankind found itself within. This impetus is especially exemplified by the growth of unbelief into a movement in the nineteenth century. From its inception right through to its mutation in the twentieth century it would, throughout, be obsessed with such words and labels. Oftentimes these were attempts to escape from the unhelpfulness of a previous label as much as to forge something innovative and helpful with a new one.

The urge to categorize such thought can be useful for the historian in tracking down the emergence of ideologies of unbelief that reach maturity later in a range of nineteenth-century writings. However, we should be aware that the search for such coherent and fully realized beliefs is capable of missing those with ideas that may simply be classed as religiously unorthodox. This line of thinking has been a valuable product of the work of Tim Whitmarsh, who has suggested the potential for such explorations of ancient Greece (Whitmarsh 2016). Certainly the later seventeenth century and the eighteenth century were peopled with individuals who held a variety of views relevant to later secularism and humanism. These generally emerge in scattered writings of the period and exhibit scepticism about the Bible, about the authority of scripture, the precise human or divine nature of Jesus Christ, the legitimacy of successive church establishments, and the benevolent (or otherwise) nature of religion broadly defined. These individuals speculated about accepted orthodoxies and found a small but significant underground readership prepared to discuss this with the like-minded. The writings of individuals like John Toland, Thomas Woolston, Thomas Chubb, Peter Annet, and Anthony Collins had created a kaleidoscope of questions about the claims of the Christian religion. These called into question the truth

of the resurrection, the power of prophecy, questioned the literal truth of the Bible, and pursued anticlerical agendas.

What makes this underground culture relevant to this later period is that a widespread, but currently largely undetected, unorthodoxy eventually emerged in the conspicuous number of individuals who flocked to the Jacobin cause in England during the 1790s. These had arguably been inspired by the growth and confidence of beliefs we might now describe as deist, which initially were confined to respectable individuals who subscribed to such views in private (Royle 1974, 23). Such beliefs stripped back the earthly trappings of religion, seeing them as evidence of human folly, antagonistic to the ideals of a creator God, and wielded to protect shabby vested interests. Instead, deists believed in matter subject to Newtonian laws and a supreme being who lay behind this universe, but one who had stepped firmly back from His creation. Such a position dovetailed nicely with the political radicalism of the period, which railed against overarching and overpowering institutions such as the monarchy and the church. At times these two could even look as though they actually blurred into one institution, especially under England's common law of blasphemy, which stated that religion was 'part and parcel of the laws of England' and to attack one was to attack the other (Nash 1999, 32–7). Developments from this evolving culture of criticism constitute the start of our story in tracing a lineage for modern secularism and humanism.

Many historians have noted the popularity of corresponding societies that spread news and information about the French Revolution, inspired also by the successful revolution in America in pursuit of individual human rights. One individual who had been closely linked with both events was Thomas Paine, who had taken action to assist both fledgling revolutionary regimes. Paine is arguably the confluence where the stream of anti-establishment political feeling met with the previously discussed submerged undercurrent of religious scepticism and deism. Paine wrote effectively about both, penning a stirringly popular defence of the French Revolution and its politics in his *Rights of Man*. He also wrote an enterprising religious counterpart, entitled *The Age of Reason*, which became a primer for at least two generations of atheists and secularists. In this work, Paine advocated a clear materialism and active defence of the pure Enlightenment appeal to reason that he felt religious and political repression aimed to derail. This counter-revolution, so he argued, had profound repercussions for the Enlightenment-inspired ideas of freewill, individual rights, and free inquiry.

Paine's ideas of smashing systems that stood in the way of humankind and its freedoms, alongside his forthright style, would comprise one wing of secularism and atheism that arguably lasted to the end of the nineteenth century. Paine's leading follower, Richard Carlile, was a West Country artisan who had been traumatized by watching the bloody events of Peterloo unfold in 1819. Thereafter he was scarcely out of the government's eyeline. Immersing himself in London radicalism, he emerged spouting a mixture of republicanism, Enlightenment scepticism, and fierce and uncompromising anticlericalism. This took him past Paine's deism into atheism, yet he consciously heightened his search for alternative morality that would save humankind from religion. This would eventually lead him to distance himself from Paine's belief in life after death and the concept of the human soul (Bush, 2016, 27–8).

Having imbibed the message of Thomas Paine, and not a little of his confrontational style, Richard Carlile set about an energetic campaign of radical and freethought publishing which saw him frequently arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned variously for blasphemy and sedition. This scarcely silenced Carlile since he used the different legal proceedings against him as a means of publicizing and showcasing the tyranny that he objected to. When incarcerated he continued to edit his radical publishing ventures from his prison cell. What was remarkable was that Carlile attracted many vigorous and devoted followers – individuals who would step in to replace him as publicists and agitators who themselves were prosecuted and imprisoned when they followed in his wake.

Carlile and his followers were a remarkably visible agitation, at least judging by the quantity of pamphlets and periodicals that reported their activities and court cases at great length. Michael Rectenwald credits Carlile and his followers with creating a culture of knowledge acquisition and transfer that had a sustained impact on intellectual radicals, as well as providing an underpinning for the intellectual aspirations of artisans – some of which would survive in autodidact approaches and attitudes (Rectenwald 2016, 38). Despite this, the relative success they enjoyed as an active agitation must be judged as questionable. This issue highlights a dilemma that faces all historians of this 'movement' – whether to judge its success by the concrete things such a group actively strove for and whether they were successful; or to spend more time searching for a more subtle or ambiguous definition of success in charting an underground culture which such programmes of moral reform inspired.

Although Carlile and his agitation fed into the radicalism of these years, and Carlile himself frequently advocated the republican cause, it is notable

that the anticlerical wing of this was marginalized and dwarfed by constitutional radical agitation. Nonetheless, Carlile and his followers effectively established the blueprint for militant atheist campaigning attitudes, bequeathing this to later-century fellow travellers. The similarity of aims advocated, and the approaches adopted by both of these early-century freethought advocates have been noted by historians as effectively constituting a Paine/Carlile 'tradition', what Rectenwald calls a 'conflict thesis' between science and religion (Rectenwald 2016, 34). This 'tradition' was later enthusiastically adopted by the central character of later nineteenth-century secularism, Charles Bradlaugh, who added something of his own character to this – mobilized, as it were, by his brushes with both religious compulsion and moral injustice witnessed and experienced while serving in the army in Ireland. Bradlaugh eventually became the dominant figure in the later nineteenth century, launching his campaigning organization, the National Secular Society, in 1866, which is still a force for secular campaigning today.

Charles Bradlaugh's attitudes also coalesced around the irrationality of Christian belief. His first pamphlet, allegedly completed when he was sixteen years of age, indicates effectively how doubts about the veracity of Christian teaching might have been widespread among mid-century youthful readers and artisans. It also gives a glimpse into the preoccupations of the doubtful and the specific tools they might have used to make such doubts coherent. In this text, Bradlaugh draws from the Creed, to which every youth of this period would have been exposed, and begins a dissection of this central text of the practising Christian of his day. He notes how espousing 'belief' involves accepting the unknown and unknowable, and likewise the nature of God himself appeared to be promoted as a mystery beyond understanding. In analysing the Fall, Bradlaugh found it unacceptable that knowledge and reason had contributed profoundly to the casting out of humankind. Thereafter the pamphlet moves into biblical criticism, which became a mainstay of secularist publicity. This sometimes expanded into three-night-long debates between secularists and Christian speakers, meetings which frequently played to packed houses throughout London and many other towns and cities. In Bradlaugh's initial pamphlet the text noted the conflicting meaning of specific passages (in one section outlining disagreements about the omnipotence of the Almighty). From here, the text adopted another popular tactic of questioning the uniqueness and supposed primacy of Christian revelation by comparing it to the doctrines of other religions. Bradlaugh here suggested how the Christian doctrine of the incarnation must surely derive from Hinduism. The Creed's suggestion that Jesus would eventually

come again to 'judge the quick and the dead' assumed a future state of being for which there was no evidence. Secularism's, by now genteel, anticlericalism appeared here in noting how mention of the Catholic Apostolic Church conjured images of the racks and thumbscrews of the Inquisition for the adolescent Bradlaugh. He concluded that the Creed was 'one of the most ridiculous declarations of faith imaginable' (Bradlaugh 1849, 5–8, 10, 12–13).

Two years before his death in 1891, Bradlaugh would take stock of secularism's achievements, noting that trying to tie Christianity down to the false promises, mistakes, and immorality of the Bible was a tactic that had perhaps now outlived its usefulness. But this had happened, so he argued, because the advocates of Christianity had themselves abandoned this as fundamental to their faith (Bradlaugh 1889, 5). To Bradlaugh, the pointed success of the campaign to undermine the Bible as an authoritative text within Christianity was hard evidence that secularism had been successful. Thereafter this same pamphlet indicated that forms of modernization were the keystone of the secularist and atheist legacy. These encompassed enabling society to cast off forms of primitive behaviour such as slavery, the abolition of which he directly linked to the power of unbelief working in the mind of individuals such as William Wilberforce (Bradlaugh 1889, 7). In a similar vein, it was modern, enlightened views that had transformed the treatment of the insane – where Christianity had only offered 'penalties rather than the curatives for mental maladies'. Likewise, those who relied upon prayer for the recovery from illness of their loved ones were now, thanks to enlightened, secular views, dubbed 'peculiar people' (Bradlaugh 1889, 12). Secularism had also worked to remove the threat of eternal torment as 'the probable fate of the great majority of the human family' (Bradlaugh 1889, 15). The rights of unbelievers had also been gradually recognized by a society that had been forced to confront the idea that they did not represent a threat to morality merely because they were godless (Bradlaugh 1889, 15).

These summations indicate that the campaigning thrust of secularism, at least according to Bradlaugh, was a quasi-Whig enhancement and sustained celebration of human progress, one where particular milestones and victories over obscurantism could readily be identified. These were sometimes ideological, but equally sometimes constituted the more concrete achievement of rights that could be observed and celebrated as 'gains' taking society away from Christianity and its spurious dominance. Taken together these could be equated with a crude species of secularization, or at least what probably constituted this phenomenon in the late nineteenth century. This closely

complemented Bradlaugh's liberal individualism, and he also campaigned, during his brief time as a Member of Parliament, against what he saw as illegitimate and damaging vested interests (Nash 2000, 104).

The logic of this position placed Bradlaugh as staunchly supportive of challenges to the laws that underpinned the Church of England, established by law. Alongside removing many of the legal disabilities that were active against unbelievers (such as the swearing of oaths in Parliament, the establishment of the right to affirm in court, and the right to a secular funeral), this served notice that occasions when the blasphemy laws were challenged would be cast as campaigns on a further front. This aimed both to promote secular views and to break the power of Christianity. Bradlaugh's writings placed such hazardous but necessary work in a long and liberalizing tradition describing what he called heresy as 'always virtuous, and this whether truth or error' (Bradlaugh 1882, 5). Irrespective of challenges to religious doctrine, Bradlaugh argued all advances in thought led their progenitors to be initially labelled as heretics, a view he emphatically shared with G. J. Holyoake. For both, the value of 'heresy' meant all possible human advances owed so much to such ideological risk-takers in many fields of human inquiry. In his words, 'the right to speak and the right to print has been partly freed from the fetters forged through long generations of intellectual prostration' (Bradlaugh 1882, 65). In effect this demonstrates that a struggle for both past and future freedoms was fundamental to the Bradlaugh stance around how to establish atheism and secularism in a Britain to be persuaded that it should now, of necessity, entertain a more tolerant religious and intellectual climate.

In this respect, the Bradlaugh wing of secularism retained a strong metropolitan presence. A phenomenon fed by Bradlaugh's own campaigns for national recognition and his long-running campaign to enter Parliament, which he eventually did in 1886 after a five-and-a-half year struggle. When we add this to his episodic proximity to legal proceedings, he starts to appear as the ideological heir to Richard Carlile. Both espoused a belief in the idea that humankind could be liberated from forms of tyranny, whether these be the thraldom of religion or the thraldom of poverty forced on the unfortunate through their inability to control their own fertility. This version of neo-Malthusianism was effectively common to both men and regularly appeared in aspects of their campaigning. This notably crystallized in the Knowlton pamphlet trial of 1877, in which Bradlaugh, alongside Annie Besant, stood trial for publishing a birth control pamphlet, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, espousing the twin motives of free speech and the right of individuals to

contraceptive knowledge otherwise hidden from them. Although convicted, the judge exonerated them from malevolent motives surrounding their actions.

Another tributary of more obviously rationalist thought that had a lasting effect upon nineteenth-century freethought and its development were the Enlightenment ideas that coalesced around utopianism. In England (and Scotland) this meant the ideas (and to a lesser extent the sporadic movements) of Robert Owen. Driven by antipathy to the 'Old Immoral World' (of which religion appeared to be a cornerstone), Owen argued vociferously for rationalist alternatives. His utopian 'New Moral World', in various guises, sought to remove and destroy nefarious influences upon the potentially perfectible development of human society and the human character. Religion was identified as one of these negative influences and, instead, Owen strove for perfectibility upon earth. As one commentator put this, Owen responded to the 'botched response' that religion had produced when confronted with the Industrial Revolution and its maladies. This had focused upon unrealized salvation in distant (or even illusory) future lives – eschewing the chance to help with immediate material conditions for those who suffered in this world (Davis 2011, 106). 'Thus religious expression was excluded from all his communitarian experiments and this, alongside with the idea of a state of perfection within creation led Royle to suggest that Owen was effectively an orthodox eighteenth century deist born slightly too late' (Royle 1974, 59).

In the turmoil of the 1820s, Owen's ideas were painstakingly reworked by others who sought social, economic, and religious solutions to the problems that afflicted a society coming to terms with aspects of industrialization and the end of a wartime economy. One facet of Owen's work relevant to our story was the creation of a network of social missionaries who spread his own 'gospel'. In this he went beyond the severe class rhetoric of Carlile, hoping to persuade the influential in the country to surrender their positions of power and control over social relations in favour of a benign surrender to Owen's principles. This quasi-social gospel was to be spread through a branch system with lectures and pamphlets which would, allegedly, assist many to see religion as superstition and error, rather than the outright tyrannical force that had dominated the minds of Carlile and his adherents. Between 1839 and 1841 it is estimated that as many as two and half million tracts were circulated and 1500 lectures given each year in pursuit of this cause (Royle 1974, 62). Notably, this movement also overlapped with the Chartist movement, and the coalition of aims this represented adds to the confusion about the precise

level of support that Owenite rationalist ideas had throughout the country. Robert Owen himself was always more interested in the explosive potential of his utopianism than the less glamorous impact that he would have upon single individuals. His attention was drawn away from the missionary scheme in favour of utopian communitarianism. The effect of this latter experiment was fleeting, and after it Owen's own absence from the scene left this wing of freethought and rationalist activity in some considerable disarray. Eventually, arising from this, but with many of these emphases intact, was the alternative to the Paine/Carlile tradition. An example of this different lineage of thought is provided by the ex-Owenites' reaction to the publication of the Knowlton pamphlet. Many shunned the chance to support this stand for free speech, disliking its moral tone and objecting to its Malthusian assumption that resources were finite and family limitation was the most effective way out of poverty. Ex-Owenites would have declared that sharing the full fruits of wealth among all was a more lasting and moral, if still utopian, solution.

In contrast to Bradlaugh's confrontationalism, this alternative ideological emphasis was that presided over by the ex-Owenite George Jacob Holyoake. Although a generation older than Bradlaugh, which places his formative years in the turmoil of the 1830s and 1840s, Holyoake was to eventually outlive Bradlaugh and remained a presence invoked by subsequent generations until the former's death in 1906. Having witnessed a plethora of ideological and campaigning failures stemming from the fragmenting and often abortive Owenite vision, Holyoake was invariably more cautious, lacking the bravado and taste for confrontation beloved of Bradlaugh. He appeared often, to his enemies within the secular movement, to be more conciliatory and in awe of both religious practitioners and the rich and powerful. Sometimes this is cited as an individual part of his character, but other explanations lend themselves. He may have inherited his taste for compromise from the malleability of Owenism. Yet equally his artisan autodidacticism would lead him to display deference to a range of authorities that he both read and met. Additionally, Holyoake wanted to preserve what he could for Owenism, and pragmatism was essential to realize this. Some have taken this further to see Holyoake's eclectic thought and actions as an important ideological link that conveyed scientific method and conclusions to the radical culture of mid-century England, while blending this with liberal libertarianism and its principles (Rectenwald 2016).

Holyoake's taste for compromise attracted followers, more obviously in the provinces, who shared this less confrontational approach. Several of these

formed groups in towns and cities, predominantly where light industry flourished. As such they were characterized as having a sect-like or congregational structure that was in part a reaction to the less secure and durable circuit of Owenite lecturers – harsh lessons had been learned. This would periodically set them at odds with the national movement presided over by Bradlaugh, because these provinces adopted a far more conciliatory attitude to the other religious groups in their midst (Nash 1992).

While Holyoake certainly appeared in several debates with Christian apologists, he was noted for a more philosophical approach to the problems faced by unbelievers. His mission, shared by those in the provinces, was to provide a species of protection for the rainbow of ideas that constituted criticism, doubt, agnosticism, freethinking, and atheism. This seemed necessary in provincial England and Scotland, where unbelievers could regularly face severe criticism and worse at the hands of the local religiously zealous. Holyoake's first major campaign after the full-scale collapse of Owenism demonstrated this approach. He formed an organization called the Anti-Persecution Union, which expressly aimed to combat all forms of religious prejudice and legal action against those considered to have displayed unorthodox views. This meant that he regularly found himself prepared to offer support to the religious who were finding themselves indicted and oppressed by other religions, or indeed sometimes by established branches of their own religion that would not tolerate forms of unorthodoxy. The contents of this periodical indicate that Holyoake sought a rapprochement with all religious thinkers, not simply in Britain. He sent letters of support and established fighting funds to aid those imprisoned for transgressions of the local religious establishment. Emphasizing his pan-theocratic defence of all forms of religious freedom, he declared to the people of Edinburgh: 'We ask, is it fitting, is it just, that *any* individual should be denied the right to express what he thinks true; be he either bribed or terrified into silence when conscience bids him speak?' (*The Movement and Anti-Persecution Gazette* no. 27, 15 June 1844).

Holyoake's organizational instinct was eventually incorporated into his ideological breakthrough creation of the concept of 'Secularism', which he began to publicize at great pace after 1851. This new idea and departure can be considered to be many things. It marked, simultaneously, the reaction to organizational failure, and it also was a move beyond the pejorative and toxic implications that had congregated around the dismissive term 'infidelity' (Rectenwald 2016, 73). As he put it later in 1871, 'nothing can more completely "conceal and disguise" the purposes of Freethought than the old names

imposed upon it by its adversaries, which associate with guilt its conscientious conclusions and impute to it as outrages, its acts of self-defence' (Holyoake 1871, ch. 2). Yet, equally, this initiative was potentially an extension of Owenite idealism and a desire to sustain social relationships. Certainly, much of the Owenite heritage stuck to the Holyoake wing of freethought in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. The creation of 'Secularism' might also be seen as a step forward in aligning freethought with mid- and later-century liberalism, a link that was to flourish as the century progressed (Royle 1980, 218–45). In essence, the ideology of Secularism avoided the confrontation model created by Carlile and did not seek the destruction or removal of religion. A later quotation from the same source implies this latter intention:

> To promote in good faith and good temper the immediate and material welfare of humanity, in accordance with the laws of Nature, is the study and duty of a Secularist, and this is the unity of principle which prevails amid whatever diversity of opinion may subsist in a Secular Society, the bond of union being the common convictions of the duty of advancing the Secular good of this life, of the authority of natural morality, and of the utility of material effort in the work of human improvement. (Holyoake 1871, ch. 5)

While he shared some of the mid-century exaggerated trust in the power of liberal ideas and institutions, he adopted an approach of 'permeation' that would later be familiar to the Fabians. This meant that he asserted the detached nature of religious revelation from the realities of the universe and of daily life and morals; as such they could be dismissed as irrelevant or as more marginal speculation beyond what could be discerned and demonstrated. This fruitless preoccupation with the unknown was to be replaced by a renewed focus upon the knowable universe, something which greatly explains Holyoake's fondness for harnessing discussion alongside the latest developments in scientific, political, psychological, and social theory. For him, a great tide of liberal progress would steadily pull society away from its religious roots, creating an enforced and unstoppable secularization of society in which all would consent and conspire. This has awoken recent scholarly attention and has made Holyoake appear a more prescient and modern thinker in the light of twentieth-century experiences of secularization, especially in the era of Charles Taylor's monumental book, *The Secular Age* (Rectenwald 2016).

But the work of the different wings of the secular movement, as well as the important work of individuals, succeeded in combating a number of

injustices and grievances perpetrated upon them by Victorian England (Royle 1980, 263–94). The right to an atheist funeral was conceded towards the end of the century and the early years of the twentieth century saw the recognition that money could be legitimately left to secular organizations for propaganda work. The right to free expression was gradually conceded as it became the central tenet of liberalism. This was inspired by the mainstream acceptance of the arguments of John Stuart Mill, which had earlier come to be the ideological underpinning of the secular movement after 1850 (Royle 1980; Nash 1992). Prosecutions for blasphemy, which were a feature of the earlier part of the century, came to be largely marginalized by the end of this same century and recognized as a tool of persecution rather than for the protection of religion and morals (Nash 1999).

One other, but later, element of quasi-secularist belief that deserves mention is the appearance of Positivism in Britain. This drew upon the ideas of Auguste Comte and represented a turning away from the apparent harshness of undiluted Secularism. This advocated a worship of humanity's achievements and had an abstract quality that made it attractive to many in intellectual circles, again in contrast to the class makeup of Secularism, which had a predominantly skilled working-class following. To some this appeared to be a compromise abandonment of strictly material interpretations of the universe, and this bifurcation revisited the arguments the Holyoake and Bradlaugh wings had initiated. Yet, the area's leading historian has noted how Positivism's influence as an alternative to either Christianity or more mainstream Secularism was limited. Although obscure and arcane, the essential ideas of Positivism did influence individuals who were themselves highly influential. The lawyer, writer, and political activist Frederic Harrison fell under Positivism's spell at Oxford, but later dissented from the views of his tutor, Richard Congreve. The distinguished twin brothers Vernon and Godfrey Lushington (both lawyers, with the latter having a distinguished career as permanent under-secretary of state to the Home Office) were also strong advocates of Positivism. The later-century intellectual Gilbert Murray was also a positivist, taking many of its principles into arguments both against and for the Second Boer War and World War I, respectively. Murray eventually became vice president of the League of Nations in 1916. In this respect, Positivism had an influence far beyond the extremely small number of adherents that it actually had (Wright 1986). It was also important since it offered later-century opponents of religion some alternatives that eventually were to prove important for the trajectory of secular ideas and their translation into new idioms in the twentieth century.

The end of the nineteenth century also saw the growth of what would become the modern humanist movement in Britain. Prior to this, Humanism had the same connotations of vagueness and seeking of spiritual fulfilment that had put die-hard nineteenth-century secularists off the Positivist movement. Eventually it merged with Ethicism, a series of ideas that again sought a new answer to explaining the ethics and motivations for human behaviour beyond theological explanations. This was a new ideological emphasis that had arrived from America, pioneered by Felix Adler and Stanton Coit. They essentially came together in the South Place Ethical Society, which had its base in Conway Hall (located in Red Lion Square, Holborn, London) (Tribe 1967). This had a congregation-like atmosphere, but equally attracted important figures such as J. A. Hobson and J. M. Robertson, who were to prove influential in taking such ideas into public circulation in the twentieth century.

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28

Bertrand Russell

DUSTIN OLSON

Lord Bertrand Russell (3rd Earl Russell, 1872–1970) is a grandmaster in twentieth-century philosophy and likely its foremost freethinker and public intellectual. Were it not so well documented, Russell's biography might appear exaggerated or even fantastical. He was a member of the British aristocracy, the most influential English-speaking philosopher of the past century,[1] a Nobel laureate (literature, 1950), and an indefatigable champion for social justice. Russell's convictions twice landed him in prison (once at the age of 80), cost him academic positions, and at times ostracized him from all but his closest confidants. Russell was also incredibly industrious with the pen. Combining his popular and academic publications, he authored more than 70 books and over 2000 articles. As a man of letters, he penned in the tens of thousands, including correspondences with numerous heads of state, cultural icons, and the who's-who of the twentieth-century intelligentsia.[2] By the end of his extremely full life, Russell was a household name, gaining notoriety through frequent television and radio appearances, popular publications, and his outspoken views on religion, freethought, and social justice.

Put somewhat anachronistically, Russell's religious outlook is best described as a type of secular humanism. As a rational skeptic whose guiding intellectual principle was that we ought not to believe anything without sufficient evidence, he accepted no dogma or supernatural metaphysics and

[1] Russell directly influenced such iconic thinkers as A. J. Ayer, Rudolph Carnap, Noam Chomsky, Gottlieb Frege, Kurt Godel, the Logical Positivists, Karl Popper, W. V. O. Quine, Frank Ramsey, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. His indirect philosophical influence extends to basically every analytic philosopher, prompting Russell biographer A. C. Grayling to note: "So pervasive is [Russell's] influence both on the matter and style of twentieth-century English-speaking philosophy that he is practically its wallpaper" (Grayling 2002, 1).

[2] Among those with whom he corresponded are Muhammad Ali, Charlie Chaplin, Lyndon B. Johnson, John F. Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev, Vladimir Lenin, John Foster Dulles, and John Lennon, to name a few. Renowned scientists Niels Bohr, Arthur Eddington, and Albert Einstein considered him an intellectual peer.

was agnostic toward all deities. He was also, therefore, contemptuous of any belief-formation not guided by this principle, such as dogmatic certainty, wishful thinking, and intellectual dishonesty. Such anti-rationalist tendencies are symptomatic of religion, and for Russell are both intellectually and morally objectionable. At root, Russell's foremost intellectual concern was truth. It is this desire for truth that demands an intellectual honesty disabused of non-rational reasons for belief, prompting Russell's humanism while simultaneously preventing his acceptance of religion in all forms.

Concerning the atheist–agnostic distinction, Russell is a self-described agnostic, admitting that he can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God. There is a caveat here, however. Agnosticism is often believed to be somehow less hostile toward religion, and so Russell further asserts that if he wanted to give an accurate public impression of his religious outlook, he is an atheist. As he cannot logically disprove Freya, Hera, or Ra, he must also be an agnostic toward their existence. However, most of us would describe ourselves as atheists concerning these gods, as none of us believe that any of them exist. Russell argues likewise, extending this attitude to *all* deities, including the monotheistic god of the Judeo–Islamic–Christian tradition. The rational grounds we have for believing in YHWH or Allah are no better than the grounds we have for believing in Zeus or Odin. Russell is egalitarian in his dismissal of all deities.

For those only familiar with Russell's polemical and popular works on religion, however, it may be surprising to know that he was a devout Christian early in life. Although he eventually becomes one of religion's great antagonists, we find a strong motivation throughout his life to discover something that can provide the emotional comforts and intellectual certainties that religion once offered. Consider, for example, the opening words of his autobiography: "Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and the unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind" (Russell 1967, 3). Much insight into our subject can be gleaned from this passage. There is an apparent tension in Russell between the high-minded intellectual desiring knowledge for its own sake, the passionate romantic, and the tragic Prometheus figure who suffers with the knowledge of human suffering. There is a unifying feature to these passions, however. In describing the *érōs* found in interpersonal love, Russell experiences "in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined" (Russell 1967, 3). There is a similar mystical insight found in the *agapē* connecting Russell to humanity's plight, triggered when faced with others' suffering. Moreover, Russell's

intellectual pursuit of "real knowledge," as discussed below, has its roots in a hope to find something akin to religious certainty. There is in some sense, then, a very "spiritual" aspect to the twentieth century's most notable atheist, who admits:

> My general attitude towards religion ... is somewhat complex [in that] although I consider some form of personal religion highly desirable, and feel many people unsatisfactory through lack of it, I cannot accept the theology of any well-known religion, and I incline to think that most churches at most times have done more harm than good.
>
> (Schilpp 1946, 726)

Understanding Russell's religious views requires that we understand his struggle to satiate personal religious inclinations and his staunch commitment to rationalism. To understand these aspects of Russell's character, it is important to understand his religious upbringing.

Russell's Religious Roots

Russell was born to an aristocratic family in Victorian England. His parents, Viscount and Viscountess Amberly, John and Katherine respectively, were atheists and freethinkers who championed women's suffrage, birth control, and free love – all highly controversial at that time. Prior to their premature deaths in 1876 and 1874, the Lord and Lady Amberly chose John Stuart Mill – another well-known atheist philosopher – as Bertrand's non-religious godfather. After his parents' deaths, and despite their desire for agnostics to raise their children, Russell was sent to live with his grandparents, twice British Prime Minister Lord John Russell and Lady Frances Russell, at the family estate, Pembroke Lodge. The motivation for the Lord and Lady Russell's insistence on adopting Bertrand and his older brother Frank was the discovery of Lady Amberly's sexual relations with one of Frank's tutors, D. A. Spalding. Foreshadowing Russell's own eventual attitude toward free love, Lord Amberly was in complete compliance with his wife's extramarital relations; indeed, he even willed that Spalding be one of his sons' guardians after his own death. Of course, such attitudes toward sexual relations were scandalous by Victorian standards. As Russell notes in his autobiography, that their grandsons would be raised by "intriguing infidels" was unacceptable to Lord and Lady Russell.

Russell was not close with his grandfather, who died in 1876. He was, however, quite close with his grandmother, who was the most significant

influence in the young Bertrand's life. Russell describes her as religiously liberal but highly moralistic, even puritanical. This moralistic outlook seems to have influenced Granny's religious views more than any theological doctrine or dogma. Nevertheless, there was a religiosity in the Russell house that followed strict ascetic guidelines for conduct, primarily based on the convictions of one's conscience through "a mist of Victorian sentiment." Within this priggish environment, Russell had an extremely solitary, albeit happy, childhood. He was educated by a series of tutors and also exposed to his grandparents' Christian faith, alternating Sunday service attendance between the Anglicanism of Lord Russell and granny's Scotch Presbyterianism. At age 70, in Russell's early teenage years, Lady Russell replaced Presbyterianism with Unitarianism.

Pre-eminent Russell scholar Nicholas Griffin (1995) highlights that under these circumstances, rather than being the product of one era, Russell's religious outlook was in fact the product of several eras. He was born in the so-called Age of Progress and along with it the rise of global nationalism, both of which ran from the mid-nineteenth century to World War I. England was still the leading world power. A generation earlier it led the world to new industrial heights via the Industrial Revolution, instantiated liberal-democratic political reforms, and was subsequently the hub for some of history's most influential and important scientific advances. With increased life expectancies, birth rates, and wealth all resulting from these advancements, science and education were increasingly championed. The romanticism of the previous era was usurped by a staunch realism and scientific materialism. The application of scientific techniques to labor production coupled with the adoption of liberalism set the tone for hope in human progress, with Darwin's theory of evolution providing a scientific grounding for such hopes. Russell was afforded every opportunity for an education suited to the times and thereby accepted the prestige of science, adopting the view that the methods of science were the only reliable roads to truth and objective reality – an outlook that Russell maintained for his entire life. In this way, Russell was very much rooted in the times. Within this intellectual climate, however, religious views could not but be affected. British culture became increasingly secular and humanistic; there was a general trend toward agnosticism and non-Christian deism for the more educated. Of course, part of his grandparents' motivation for taking guardianship of Bertrand was to avoid this moral devolution, "a circumstance," Griffin notes, "that, in historical terms, put his religious development back a full generation" (Griffin 1995, 48).

It is important to highlight how closely related morality and religion were for Lady Russell, as her religious views most influenced Russell's early religious convictions. Concerning her moral convictions, one might say they were rooted in a combination of God and country. As members of the British political elites, Lady Russell impressed upon young Bertrand the importance of "family tradition and the moral and material progress of Great Britain. (The second of these was closely associated in Granny's mind with the first)" (Griffin 1995, 48–9). She accepted the upper-class sentiments of the age, which held that with a proper moral education, one should know right from wrong and act accordingly. Morals, then, were a matter of conscience and stringent, one might say religious, self-regulation. Moreover, in public matters, this moral outlook championed the liberal principles of tolerance, even of eccentric positions, and public service. Although Russell eventually broke from the puritanical rigor with which granny practiced her ethics, he retained significant moral residue from her example: "I have realized . . . the importance she had in moulding my outlook on life. Her fearlessness, her public spirit, her contempt for convention, and her indifference to the opinion of the majority have always seemed good to me and have impressed themselves upon me as worthy of imitation" (Russell 1967, 16). Indeed, we find repeated examples in Russell's own life of these characteristics put into practice, not least of which, as discussed below and with a hint of irony, Russell's intellectual convictions prompting his eventual break from "his people."

Although Lady Russell held that religion's essence was more about living a moral life than quibbling about theological dogmas, she nevertheless held strong convictions in the necessity of God for meaning, morality, and purpose. She notes in her diary that "without immortality life is 'all a cheat', and without a Father in heaven, right and wrong, love, conscience, joy, sorrow, are words without meaning and the universe if governed at all, is governed by a malignant spirit who gives us hope and aspirations never to be fulfilled, affections to be wasted, a thirst for knowledge never to be quenched" (MacCarthy and Russell 1911, 240). We do not know exactly what Russell's religious education included, but it is clear that he accepted something very much like Granny's religious outlook. Indeed, it was the concern at the loss of morals and meaning if there were no God that pained Russell most when his faith began to loosen.

We are given a description of Russell's religiosity, intellectual convictions, and increasing alienation he felt from his people in notes kept from age fifteen to eighteen. These notes were written in Greek and labeled *Greek Exercises*

(see Russell 1983, 1–20), so as to prevent "his people" from discovering his meditations – an action undertaken because of Granny's condescension when he earlier explained his adoption of a utilitarian ethics. The Greek Exercises reveal a teenager struggling to be intellectually honest, while at the same time taking axe to root to some of his most deeply held convictions. As Russell accepted science as the most rational grounds for knowledge, he sought to provide scientifically rational grounds for his belief in God. He even hoped to scientifically reform Unitarianism in ways analogous to Martin Luther's liberal reformation of Christianity from Catholicism, and was intent on making religion helpful to living a good life.

Although the arguments in the Greek Exercises are not always sophisticated, or even valid, we do find early examples of some of Russell's chief intellectual virtues. First, Russell is unambiguous in his conviction to not assume a proposition true prior to assessing the reasons for and against it, no matter how distasteful he may find the results; twice he reminds himself to maintain his "vow" to follow reason (Russell 1983, 5 and 10). Second, Russell asserts no more and no less than what he thinks the evidence supports, remaining non-dogmatic concerning the conclusions he finds most acceptable. Finally, Russell gives the utmost respect to the undertaking, focusing on the most salient details while avoiding peripheral distractions that often arise in such abstract intellectual exercises. One by one Russell rejects what he thinks are pillars for belief in God, such as the possibility of miracles, the doctrine of free will, and the doctrine of immortality. His belief in God nevertheless persisted because of his acceptance of the First-Cause argument. At eighteen, however, he came to reject this argument also, attributing his final turn to Mill's autobiography, where Mill notes that we can always ask: "What caused God?" Exposure to this point coupled with the problem of evil prompted a gestalt in Russell, after which he found no reason to continue his religious faith.

After Russell finished his meditations, he admits to being "quite glad to be done with whole subject" (Russell 1983, 43). Despite this apparent nonchalance, reaching this conclusion was by no means easy. At one point in his reflection, he admits: "I have the very greatest fear that my life may hereafter be ruined by my having lost the support of religion," and that "it costs me much to keep [my vow to follow reason] and to reject all sentiment" (Russell 1983, 15). There seems to be an internal struggle within Russell between his desire for religion to be true, and his desire to remain intellectually honest. In the end, of course, the scales fell on the side of intellectual honesty, but this result did not come without toil:

> I used never for a moment to doubt that truth was a good thing to get hold of. But now I have the greatest doubt and uncertainty. For the search for truth has led me to these results . . . whereas, had I been content to accept the teachings of my youth I should have remained comfortable. The search for truth has shattered most of my old beliefs, and has made me commit what are probably sins . . . I do not think it has in any way made me happier . . . it has . . . made it much harder to make bosom friends, and worst of all, has debarred me from free intercourse with my people . . . In my own case, I should say the effects of a search for truth have been more bad than good . . . Hence I have great doubts about the unmixed advantage of truth. (Russell 1983, 16)

Such entries provide a stark contrast to Russell's more familiar views on the value of truth and intellectual honesty, revealing the angst that comes with changing one's fundamental beliefs and ultimately one's overall conception of the world. Emerging from this struggle as he does seems to calcify Russell's convictions that wishful thinking and not conforming one's beliefs to the available evidence are at once antithetical to the search for truth and intellectually pusillanimous. Indeed, we find near the end of the Greek Exercises a passage more redolent in tone of Russell's later polemics: "Let us despise those whose reason tells them they know nothing about [immortality], but who fall back on "faith," which seems to me always to mean belief in something unreasonable, and is the most cowardly thing to call down upon us as divine gifts" (Russell 1983, 20).

Russell's Non-creedal "Religion"

In many ways, the Greek Exercises serve as a prelude to Russell's relationship with religion and inquiry later in life. We notice the tortured intellectual honesty with which Russell rejects various dogmas. This experience clearly impacted Russell as it establishes a lifelong rationalism. We also find in the Greek Exercises, however, someone who takes comfort in the blessed assurances and means to living a good life that religion purportedly provides. So although Russell never again accepted any dogma or religious metaphysics, he certainly felt the loss of religion in his life and in many ways retained his religious disposition thereafter. Russell's daughter Katherine Tait acknowledges this latter point, claiming that her father "was by temperament a profoundly religious man, the sort of passionate moralist who would have been a saint in a more believing age" (Tait 1975, 184). Perhaps A. C. Grayling captures this point best: "In his agnostic way . . . Russell

yearned for the heavens, and strove to find pathways to lead mankind there" (Grayling 2002, 104).

Early in his Cambridge years, Russell's focus was predominantly intellectual. There remained in these intellectual endeavors a religious element, insofar as Russell sought to discover "defence for anything that could be called religious belief, however vague" and to "persuade [himself] that something could be known, in pure mathematics if not elsewhere" (Russell 1959, 11). For a time, he had found hope in neo-Hegelian British idealism, a popular view among Cambridge metaphysicians at that time. In place of God, neo-Hegelians offered a different metaphysical entity that promised immortality and the unity of humans with the material universe: the Absolute. The Absolute was the purported result of pure reason, not faith or dogma, and was supposed to represent true reality, not mere appearances. The British crisis of faith resulting from Darwinism and the conflicts resulting from industrial capitalism did not bother the Hegelians. Evil and suffering were mere appearances that would eventually be resolved in the true reality of the Absolute. As with his hope for religion in the Greek Exercises, Russell attempted to unify the sciences consistent with the Absolute. Eventually Russell dismissed idealism for much the same reasons he dismissed religion. There is neither evidence in favor of, nor a demonstrative proof for, the Absolute – a realization that prompted Russell to conclude that philosophers only maintained their idealism for the solace it provided (see "Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is" in Russell (1957, 94–103)). For a time, however, he found hope in both the intellectual sophistication and the quasi-religious elements of British idealism.

Russell's eventual break from neo-Hegelianism, unlike his previous break with religion, did not manifest an internal despair. Rather, he continued filling the religious void in his life with his intellectual pursuits. Russell felt a renewed excitement for philosophy and mathematics from groundbreaking advances in formal logic. The promise shown by these news methods preoccupied Russell, who believed he had found the certainty he was searching for, admitting, "intellectually ... September 1900 was the highest point of my life" (Russell 1967, 192). Per his three passions, however, Russell's quest for knowledge, which "led upward toward the heavens," was grounded in the experience of human suffering. Of such suffering, formal logic and mathematics were necessarily silent. The religious solace Russell might have hoped to find in mathematics was thereby eclipsed by a mystical experience of *agapē*,

which arose most vehemently in 1901 after observing a close friend's illness-based suffering. Russell describes the outcome of this experience:

> Suddenly the ground seemed to give way beneath me, and I found myself in quite another region. Within five minutes I went through some such reflections as the following: the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable; nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached; whatever does not spring from this motive is harmful, or at best useless . . .
>
> I had become a completely different person. For a time a sort of mystic illumination filled me . . . Having for years cared only for exactness and analysis, I found myself filled with semi-mystical feelings about beauty, with an intense interest in children, and with a desire almost as profound as that of the Buddha to find some philosophy which should make human life endurable . . . . The mystic insight which I then imagined myself to possess has largely faded . . . but something of what I thought I saw in that moment has remained always with me. (Russell 1967, 193–4)

We find Russell experiencing in this moment what some might describe as a spiritual awakening. Of course, Russell never doubted that the cosmos is the result of natural mechanistic processes, and that we are simply one minute by-product of this order. Nevertheless, we are here, cosmically insignificant as we may be, and with us comes the human condition. It is this condition that religion and Hegelianism could speak to in ways that logical analysis could not. The excitement Russell felt in his intellectual endeavors was diminished by their emotional emptiness. It is this facet of the human condition that Russell hoped to address with a non-creedal, "personal" religion, which was only initially recognized through his mystical experience.

Up to 1912, Russell was content to describe mystical insights as in some sense religious. Taking a religious attitude, or embracing our religious instincts, could conjure mystic wisdom. Russell explains how the religious attitude can be coupled with a rationalist outlook to produce a type of emollient to the human condition:

> What we have to do, and what privately we do, is to treat the religious instinct with profound respect, but to insist that there is no shred or particle of truth in any of the metaphysics it has suggested: to palliate this by trying to bring out the beauty of the world and of life, so far as it exists, and above all to insist upon preserving the seriousness of the religious attitude and its habits of asking the ultimate questions. And if good lives are the best thing we know, the loss of religion gives new scope for courage and fortitude, and

> so may make good lives better than any that there was room for while religion afforded a drug in misfortune. (Russell 1967, 250 – original 1903)

Russell believed that the religious attitude fostering mystical insight enables us to escape our individual loneliness and suffering. In other words, the wisdom derived from mystical experience frees us from the burdens of the human condition.

Summarizing the religious strands in Russell's personal ethos, Edgar Sheffield Brightman highlights its four essential characteristics: "a sense of infinity, a sense of membership in the whole, resignation, and social justice" (Schilpp 1946, 552). Russell explores these themes most explicitly in the years between his mystical experience and World War I. His first attempt to address how we might combat the human condition, written while in a state of depression, is the famous essay, "A free man's worship" (Russell 1957, 104–16 – original 1903). Here, Russell suggests that in light of our insignificance within the omnipotent power of nature, we should stoically accept "the tyranny of outside forces" (Russell 1957, 109) that pit the way things are against the way we would like them to be. Such passive resignation, ironically, facilitates the wisdom needed for the only attainable freedom available to us, the freedom of thought. Freethought allows us to transcend fate and death for the short time that we are here; it recognizes and is able to produce beauty, goodness, and virtue. Moreover, such transcendent wisdom manifests in identifying with all others as actors in the same tragedy, "united . . . by the strongest of all ties, the tie of a common doom" (Russell 1957, 115). Unified in this way, we should exhibit courage, sympathy, and exhortation to help free the other tragic actors. Indeed, the recognition of our unity resulting from the freedom of passive resignation then becomes another avenue to freedom: abandoning "the struggle for private happiness" and expelling "all eagerness of temporary desire . . . is emancipation" (Russell 1957, 114).

Russell returns to similar themes, albeit with significantly less melodrama, ten years later in "The essence of religion" (Russell 1999, 57–69) – written in large part as a means of bridging the religious differences he had with his lover at the time, Lady Ottoline Morrell. Here, Russell proposes that the essence of religion is the sudden wisdom gained through mystical experiences rooted in attitudinal worship, acquiescence, and love, bringing a sense of union with the universe, a "subordination of the finite part of our life to the infinite part" (Russell 1999, 68). So while Russell maintained that there was no evidence whatever supporting both metaphysical and dogmatic religious

beliefs, he thought the religious attitude motivating such beliefs was defensible. Attitudes, unlike beliefs, are non-doxastic and as such are not subject to the same rationality standards. In this way, then, Russell held that we could "preserve religion without any dependence upon dogmas to which an intellectually honest assent grows daily more difficult" (Russell 1999, 60); indeed, "in some ways . . . the religion which has no dogma is greater and more religious than one which rests upon the belief that in the end our ideals are fulfilled in the outer world" (61). To that end, then, "we must find a union [with the world as it is] which asks nothing of the world and depends only upon ourselves" (Russell 1999, 68).

"The essence of religion" was the only published portion of a book-length treatment of these matters, called *Prisons*. This manuscript's title does not refer to the prisons of dogma, as one might suspect given Russell's later works. Rather, the prisons refer to self-limitations rooted in the human condition. This manuscript remained unpublished as Russell stopped appealing to religion, or the religious attitude, focusing rather on the human experience. We find examples of this refocusing in Russell's "Mysticism and logic" (Russell 1999, 109–31, original 1914) and the "Religion and the churches" (Russell 1999, 153–66, original 1916) chapter of his *Principles of Social Reconstruction*. Here, the characteristics found in the so-called religious attitude are maintained, but described in purely experiential, non-religious, terms. For these reasons, although many commentators and at times even Russell himself refer to his outlook as a personal religion, "personal ethos" is perhaps a more appropriate description of this outlook.

Russell's ethos, put in terms of human experience, contrasts with religious dogma and metaphysics. Rather than being rooted in love and knowledge, Russell contends that religion is born of fear, a love of the marvelous, and a fallacious conception of human importance. Per above, Russell is not dismissive of the human spirit that manifests religious belief. He does contend, however, that if we are to have the appropriate piety toward nature, love for others, and emotional response to the human condition, the spiritual component of the human experience must be brought into harmony with the instinctual and intellectual components. We must replace fear with hope, tether our love of the marvelous to impersonal intellect, and acknowledge that there are no grounds whatever for believing that humanity has some heightened, transcendent, cosmic significance. Through impersonal intellect we recognize and accept the universe and our place in it for what they are. Too much emphasis on intellect, however, can result in a failure to recognize the importance of instinctual love, such as benevolent feelings toward our

groups, the desire to procreate, and the desire for nourishment, which lead to the delights of companionship, sexual intercourse, and good food. When the intellect is in harmony with the spirit, one grasps a sense of the infinite, recognizes cosmic unity *sub specie aeternitatis*, and delights in beauty, nature, and virtue. When all three are in harmony, those feelings characteristic of instinct, feelings of benevolence and delight, extend to all others. "The root of the matter," Russell suggests, "is a very simple and old fashioned thing . . . The thing I mean . . . is love, Christian love, or compassion . . . If you feel this, you have all that anybody should need in the way of religion" (Russell 1952, 114).

Russell's Rationalism and Religious Criticism

Post-World War I, Russell becomes much more antagonistic toward religion. This antagonism is rooted in his rationalism, which we have observed throughout the foregoing discussion. Succinctly, this rationalism has three general commitments: do not feel certain of anything, resist the urge to form a conclusion prior to inquiry or to accept a conclusion simply for its appeal, and follow the evidence. This is the crux of Russell's rejection of religion. He repeatedly emphasizes that there is no evidence supporting God's existence, and that "no real excellence can be inextricably bound up with unfounded beliefs; if theological beliefs are unfounded, they cannot be necessary for the preservation of what is good in the religious outlook" (Russell 1961, 18). The only intellectually responsible attitude toward propositions asserting the existence of deities, the supernatural, or metaphysics not grounded in the scientific spirit, is the suspension of judgment. The motivations for forming and maintaining religious beliefs are none of them intellectually honest or based in the scientific attitude; they are based, rather, on wishful thinking and dogma. Such beliefs, according to Russell, are both irrational and harmful, warranting intellectual and moral criticism.

Concerning the intellectual criticism that there is no positive reason in favor of theism, Russell considers numerous intellectual defenses for the existence of God via the so-called religion of reason. We can divide these intellectual defenses into two categories: traditional scholastic arguments and natural theology. Regarding the traditional cosmological, moral-transcendental, and teleological arguments, Russell had much to say, little of it novel. He seems content to simply show the fallacies in each (see especially "Why I am not a Christian" (1957, 3–23) and "Is there a God?" (1997, 542–8)). The one traditional argument that Russell does provide

a novel, and powerful, critique of is the ontological argument. This argument holds that God as a perfect being lacks no essential attributes; since we can conceive of God's perfection, he must necessarily exist; he would not have the attribute of existence otherwise and would be thereby imperfect. Russell refutes this argument with the advent of his theory of definite descriptions. Using modern logical techniques, Russell demonstrates how existence is expressed by quantifiers, not property expressions or predicates. This point is of special interest as the ontological argument is the one traditional argument not discussed in "Why I am not a Christian."

Of natural theology and the relationship between religion and science, Russell again highlights religion's intellectual shortcomings. As a science expositor and naturalist philosopher, Russell was well versed in historical and contemporary science. When discussing the past conflicts between religion and science, he acknowledges that science has tentatively, but uniformly, proved victorious in the face of vigorous opposition:

> The clergy have fought a losing battle . . . Ousted from one position they have taken up another. After being worsted in astronomy, they did their best to prevent the rise of geology; they fought against Darwin in biology, and at the present time they fight against scientific theories of psychology and education. At each stage, they try to make the public forget their earlier obscurantism, in order that their present obscurantism may not be recognized. (Russell 1961, 47)

That religion must make continual concessions to the success of science highlights why the scientific approach to belief acquisition is preferable to the less intellectually honest religious belief acquisition. And the greater the degree to which scientific advancements conflict with religious dogma, the greater degree of cognitive dissonance and anti-rationalism manifest in religious apologists.

Consider, for example, the natural theologian's appeal to scientific law as evidence of divine order. Russell again offers nothing unavailable to free-thinkers from earlier generations and admits that he cannot outright dismiss this possibility. He does, however, offer strong rhetorical challenges against such thinking, emphasizing how these appeals always extend beyond the evidence, fail to acknowledge their logical implications, and fail to fully appreciate the science being employed, thereby revealing an underlying bias in favor of their preferred conclusion. To those who argue that the Big Bang is the first cause, proving God's existence, Russell notes: "They carefully abstain from attempts to show that this hypothesis makes matters more

intelligible" (Russell 1997, 543). Extending divine order to include Darwinian evolution as the means by which God's plan unfolds, culminating in human existence, exacerbates the problems. On the one hand, if our existence is contingent on deterministic law and random mutation, then God's omnipotence is undermined. On the other hand, human existence is "a brief interlude between two long lifeless epochs . . . if really man is the purpose of the universe the preface seems a little long" (Russell 1997, 545), and the epilogue will be even longer. Such anthropic self-importance is entirely at odds with an honest scientific outlook.

Russell also acknowledges how the traditional problem of evil is compounded with the acceptance that there is purpose mandated by an omnipotent creator. Beyond the more standard problem of evil, where the theist's objective is to account for why an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful creator would *allow* evil and suffering in the world, Russell proposes that the theist is committed to a stronger view. Rather than simply allowing evil and suffering, such a creator would be *the author* of all evil and suffering as part of the divine plan – this view anticipates the problem of *divine evil*. Imagine an extremely powerful human who, in wielding their power, willingly afflicted millions of people with cancer and murdered many others. Russell rightly notes that we would consider such a person a fiend. He also notes, however, that "an Omnipotent Deity, if there be one, murders everybody . . . [and] afflicts many thousands every year with [cancer]" (Russell 1997, 547), prompting the conclusion: "That Creator, far from being loving and kind . . . must be of a degree of wickedness scarcely conceivable" (Russell 1997, 547). Such observations prompt the conclusion that the very notion of an omnipotent creator whose purpose we must accept uncritically "could only have arisen under oriental despotisms where sovereigns, in spite of capricious cruelties, continued to enjoy the adulation of their slaves. It is the psychology appropriate to this outmoded political system which belatedly survives in orthodox theology" (Russell 1997, 547). Consider, for example, a popular response to the problem of evil offered by Gottfried Leibniz. Leibniz, who Russell highly respected, held that God created the logically best possible universe. If there are cases of evil and suffering, then they are needed for the overall greater good. Russell notes that even if this argument is valid, it no more proves the existence of a God who needs evil to produce good than it does the existence of a malicious devil who needs goodness to produce evil – and given the ratio of evil-to-good in the world there is perhaps more evidence in favor of the latter. Obviously, Russell finds neither option likely, but notes: "The fact that the unpleasant possibility is never noticed shows the optimistic bias which seems to me to infect most writing on the philosophy of religion" (Schilpp 1946, 727).

Russell acknowledges, with a degree of contempt, that many Protestant theistic apologists suffer similar intellectual shortcomings, but do not even attempt to provide rational standards for their beliefs. Consider two popular theistic defenses. The first is pragmatic, contending that people need religion to find comfort or to have moral guidelines. Regarding comforting beliefs that have no evidential backing, Russell is contemptuous: "nobody but a coward would consciously choose to live in a fool's paradise" (Russell 1997, 546). Likewise, Russell scorns the argument that religion provides moral grounding, without which we would not behave well. This argument, of course, provides no proof whatever that there is a God; the conclusion is of more social interest than theological insofar as belief–behavior relations can be manipulated to get people to act how you would like them to. Moreover, there is in fact no empirical backing for the assertion that religious folk are overall better behaved than non-religious. For one who is seriously concerned with whether God exists, such arguments from utility provide no satisfaction.

A second popular theistic argument appeals to our sense that there is something greater than us, and our near need to find purpose in the events surrounding our lives. Russell himself was subject to this type of argument. Theistic commentators Ronald Jager (1972, 484–507) and Brightman, for example, contend that Russell ignores clear evidence for God in his own experiences. Noting his attempts to develop a non-creedal religion, they suggest that Russell either implicitly accepted God, or at least had an experiential basis for belief in God found in his need to account for the human condition. Again, however, Russell notes that no one would accept this reasoning without already presupposing a religious metaphysics, or wanting to confirm desired beliefs: "The fact that I feel a need for something more than human is no evidence that the need can be satisfied, any more than hunger is evidence that I shall get food" (Schilpp 1946, 726). Moreover, the fallacies in this reasoning are compounded when Russell emphasizes the implicit premise in arguments that appeal to experience as an evidential basis for God: "that what seems to us our deepest experiences cannot be deceptive, but must have all the significance they appear to have" (Schilpp 1946, 726). There is, of course, no reason whatever to accept this premise.

In combination with the above intellectual reasons against religious belief, Russell also offers a moral argument against religion. Indeed, he contends that religion is "a disease" that has produced "untold misery on the human race" (Russell 1957, 24). There are two horns to this argument, each closely related to Russell's vitriol toward all forms of dogmatism and wishful

thinking. The first horn again concerns the psychology involved in forming and maintaining religious beliefs. Recall that religion, according to Russell, results from a combination of fear, an inflated conception of human importance, a love of the marvelous, and the desire for ultimate purpose. All these motivations are emotional and are anathema to rationalist tenets. Any faith-based belief dogmatically held, as is standard for most religions, is necessarily at odds with moral and intellectual progress. The slavish devotion to creed opens the potential to adopt any belief, no matter how odious. Again, we can return to the religious rationalization for the pain and suffering rampant in the world to recognize this point. When faced with starving children, born into their plight, for example, the religious person will either hold that this suffering is due to humanity's sinful nature, or that such suffering must be part of God's ultimate plan. Russell's response to these rationalizations emphasizes the moral problem with putting creed before reason: "In order to bring [oneself] to say this, [one] must destroy in [oneself] all feelings of mercy and compassion . . . No [one] who believes that all is for the best in this suffering world can keep [one's] ethical values unimpaired, since [one] is always having to find excuses for pain and misery" (Russell 1957, 30).

Devotion to creed, according to Russell, enables religion to extend beyond the churches. Ideologies such as strong nationalism, Communism, and Fascism are as much religions as Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism. Indeed, Russell suggests that "the new creeds of Communism and Fascism are the inheritors of theological bigotry" (Russell 1961, 173), admitting that these "new systems of dogma . . . are even worse than the old systems, but they could never have taken a hold over men's minds if orthodox dogmatic habits had not been instilled in youth" (Russell 1957, 206). In other words, the psychology that enables religious dogma is the exact psychology enabling any dogmatic acceptance of any ideology. In both cases, ideological devotion inhibits one's capacity for critical engagement with the accepted orthodoxy and critical self-assessment of one's own beliefs, which in turn inhibits the very capacity that enables morality: "if people are not intelligent, they will be content to believe what they have been told and may do harm in spite of the most genuine benevolence" (Russell 1957, 57). This is the crux of the first horn of Russell's moral argument against religion.

The second horn of Russell's moral argument addresses specific religious dogmas. The doctrines of sin, salvation, and the soul, for example, inhibit personal happiness, make us unnaturally self-absorbed, and make no contribution to our ability to live well together. One specific example of this self-absorbed Puritanism that impacted Russell directly in both his personal and public life is sexual ethics. Sex and reproduction are completely natural and as

such should not be taboo, even with childhood education. That one should feel shame at having strong and natural impulses has certainly caused no end of self-loathing for the believer who is told that to even think of another sexually is equivalent to adultery (Matt 5:28). Likewise, the doctrine of the soul surviving bodily death only to enter Hell, wherein people are threatened with eternal torture: "the fear of hell was – and to a lesser extent still is – a source of the deepest anxiety, which much diminished the comfort to be derived from belief in survival" (Russell 1961, 135).

The second horn closely relates to the first insofar as one's ethical sensibilities are usurped by devotion to religious creed. It is easy to recognize how such devotion can produce morally questionable acts. Returning again to the belief in eternal damnation, Russell observes that "the motive to save others from hell was urged as a justification of persecution; for if a heretic, by misleading others, could cause them to go to suffer damnation, no degree of earthly torture could be considered excessive if employed to prevent so terrible a result" (Russell 1961, 135). The brutalities of the Inquisition, the Crusades, and Jihad pale in comparison to everlasting torture. Nevertheless, each is justified by the tradition whence they came. Indeed, the list of harmful by-products resulting from religious creeds *en acte* is legion: the rejection of contraception, the oppression of homosexuals, the murder of infidels, the subjugation of women, the keeping of slaves, and even genocide all currently receive religious support from various religious sects. Such realities prompt Russell to conclude: "The harm that theology has done is not to *create* cruel impulses but to give them sanction of what professes to be a lofty ethic, and to confer an apparently sacred character upon practices which have come down from more ignorant and barbarous ages" (Russell 1961, 106).

In Sum

In his twilight years, Russell offered this description of his life: eighty years of changing beliefs and unchanging hope. This description captures Russell's intellectual and moral commitments. The intellectual commitment is to remain intellectually honest, believing only what the evidence supports. The moral commitment is to be inspired by love and guided by knowledge, being resigned to accept those things that we cannot change coupled with a hopeful initiative to improve human life wherever possible. This is the core of Russell's personal ethos and his rejection of dogma in all forms; dogma cannot survive and, according to Russell, is antithetical to each of these commitments. If the essence of the religious attitude is the subordination of our sense

of the finite to the infinite, then the essence of religious belief is the subordination of our rational faculties to dogmatism and emotive unreason. Dogma, wishful thinking, a desire for the marvelous, and human self-importance are anti-rationalist characteristics, inhibiting both moral and intellectual growth. Indeed, the psychology facilitating religious belief is one that Russell encouraged people to liberate themselves from. We have to be honest, recognizing that there is no evidence that the challenges we face as individuals and as a species will find solutions from without. "Humans, insofar as we are not subject to natural forces," Russell concludes, "are free to work out our own destiny. The responsibility is ours, and so is the opportunity" (1997, 548).

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Further Reading

Collections

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(probably the most famous of Russell's religious statements), "The free man's worship," "Has religion made useful contributions to civilization," and "What I believe."

Russell, B. 1999. *Russell on Religion: Selections from the Writings of Bertrand Russell*, ed. L. Greenspan and S. Andersson. London: Routledge. A valuable collection of primary source essays with commentary; sections include Russell's personal religious statements, religion and philosophy, religion and science, religion and morality, and religion and history.

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Russell, B. 1961 [1943]. "An outline of intellectual rubbish," in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, ed. R. E. Egner and L. E. Denonn. London: Allen & Unwin, 45–71. An essay describing beliefs that were once widely accepted but are now generally accepted as rubbish, with a comparison to more recently accepted beliefs that should be recognized as equally nonsensical – also connects the psychology of secular dogma to religious dogma.

Russell, B. 1997 [1953]. "Is there a god?" in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Volume 11: Last Philosophical Will and Testament, 1943–68*, ed. J. G. Slater. London: Routledge, 542–8. An article advancing a number of intellectual reasons against traditional theology and God's existence.

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29

Robert Ingersoll

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Commentators in the nation's newspapers foresaw impending doom. In the United States, as well as across the Atlantic, a frightening intellectual movement was gaining steam in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The movement supposedly portended the end of Christianity, morality, and civil society. Writing in the *Chicago Tribune* (1870), one commentator chided the "moral weakness" of the movement, which embraced "mere facts without faiths or fancies, mere knowledge without affection of imagination, and mere science without worship or inspiration." In 1877, a commentator for the *Weekly Tribune* in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, saw in the movement a "bigotry" and "hostility" to life that revealed its hollow core. In 1889, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* quoted the Archbishop of New York on the dreadful danger of this movement: "What will human life be in this world? What will become of the family? What of civil society itself?"

The movement that so frightened these commentators was known as "freethought," a rather amorphous and wide-ranging intellectual initiative premised on the idea that individuals should be able to contemplate the world's biggest questions on their own terms, aside from the dictates of established authorities, especially of the ecclesiastical variety. The roots of freethought are long and expansive, but it surged around the western world from 1870 to 1920. These decades marked the so-called Golden Age of Free Thought, as "infidels," "heretics," "agnostics," and "unbelievers" assumed new places of prominence, even of respect, in public culture (Jacoby 2004, ch. 6). In the aftermath of the US Civil War, in the churn of industry that transformed America, amid patterns of migration largely unparalleled until that point, freethought blossomed.

Interestingly, at the same time freethought blossomed, so did religion itself. During the final decades of the nineteenth century, US society was becoming more religious, not less so (Ahlstrom 2004, 715–48). Religion expanded and diversified at the very moment freethought purportedly

threatened Christianity, morality, and civil society. New expressions of belief, new ideas and symbols, new legions of church-goers transformed American society alongside the freethought movement. In truth, the rise of freethought and the increasing religiosity of American society were part of the same intellectual upheaval reshaping the nation.

There is no better exemplar of freethought's golden age and the United States' expanding and diversifying religious culture than Robert Green Ingersoll, one of the most unique, influential, and divisive figures in American history. Ingersoll was a force in American politics, working alongside congressmen, senators, and presidents. He was also a high-profile attorney for several corporate giants. Yet, beyond any of the other roles he played, he was the nation's most influential critic of revealed religion. Supporters and detractors knew him as the Great Agnostic, the Pagan Pope, and the Apostle of Modern Infidelity. For weeks and months on end, he traveled the country on the nation's lecture circuit, delivering two-hour talks to massive audiences in sprawling cities and tiny towns. His lectures covered such topics as "The gods," "The ghosts," "Some mistakes of Moses," "How to read the Bible," "Liberty of man, woman, and child," "Myth and miracle," "Why I am an agnostic," and many more. These lectures assaulted the religious beliefs that many "ordinary Americans" held dear, chastising the Bible, denouncing the church, and skewering famous religious figures. Ingersoll's lectures made the divine seem devilish and the devilish seem divine. Yet Americans celebrated his ideas; even those who believed, and would continue to believe, in the ideas he ridiculed thought Ingersoll was doing immense good for religion in America. Ingersoll drew people together and assaulted their beliefs, and they loved it.

How Ingersoll was able to connect with people across the spectrum of religious belief is the focus of this chapter. Freethought and increasing religious diversity prepared audiences for Ingersoll's appeals, which offered intellectual engagement, not religious finality. Thus, this chapter will explore the dynamics of the Golden Age of Free Thought and the nation's religious culture in the nineteenth century, and then analyze what Ingersoll said in his lectures to bring people together. Ultimately, Ingersoll animated national conversations about religious ideas that allowed both believers and agnostics – and those in between – to find common ground and to celebrate pluralism.

The Rise of Freethought

The movement that had its golden age in the decades after the US Civil War was a long time coming (Jacoby 2004). Around the world, historic figures

such as Nicolaus Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, Michael Servetus, and Robert Burns demonstrated the fruits of non-orthodox inquiry, and they inspired generations of freethought proponents. In the United States, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson loomed especially large for Ingersoll and his ilk. Yet the work of these founding figures hardly constituted a movement. They offered, rather, inspiration for subsequent generations of freethought advocates.

It was not until after the revolutionary era in the United States that freethought advocates formed something akin to a movement. Robert Owen and Frances Wright, for instance, applied the principles of freethought toward issues of labor, gender, and universal education, while John Fellows and Elihu Palmer worked to radicalize party politics according to freethought ideals. Over time, freethought rattled the religious establishment as well, with various ministers, theologians, and lecturers questioning Protestant orthodoxy.

A good example can be found in the work of Abner Kneeland, a former clergyman who was integral to liberal religious culture in New England. After exploring the historical evidence for Christianity, Kneeland left the faith and explained his reasons for doing so in a series of lectures in 1829. Shortly thereafter, he relocated to Boston to serve as lecturer for the "First Society of Free Enquirers" – the first freethought organization in the United States. In 1831, Kneeland created the *Boston Investigator*, which quickly became the paper of record for freethought reform. In explaining the paper's purpose, Kneeland not only stressed his opposition to "unnecessary monied Institutions," to slavery, and to "imprisonment for debt," but he explained the rationalist basis for his work: the *Investigator* "will advocate the existence of no being, beings or things, whether angelic, infernal, or divine, of which the senses of man can take no cognizance" (French 1980, 205).

Kneeland's tone and that of the *Boston Investigator* were often combative and oppositional. He hoped to advance secular humanism in American public culture, squaring off against religion and its social influence wherever he could. But his work was one piece of a much larger puzzle that prepared the way for the golden age later in the century. At the same time Kneeland was pushing secular humanism, religion itself, including mainstream Protestantism, was moving in new directions. The rise of liberal theology, via the influence of German higher criticism, was just as important, and probably more so, to the Golden Age of Free Thought as the influence of Kneeland, Paine, Jefferson, and others.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, European theologians and critics, especially in Germany, began to question how Bible scholars had approached the sacred text. Drawing on numerous intellectual advancements, including Enlightenment science, these theologians and critics began subjecting the Bible to the same kind of inquiry they would any other historical text. The result was what became known as "higher criticism," which investigated such biblical issues as authorship, date of development, geographical influences, and the audience to and for whom the text was written. In general, higher critics argued that the Bible offered an esteemed spiritual message, but its inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and unsustainable claims in matters of history, science, geography, and more meant that the doctrine of inerrancy had to be set aside (Addinall 1991, 140). In effect, higher criticism expanded the borders of religious inquiry, signaled the possibility of alternative modes of thought, and unearthed a wealth of evidence from which freethought advocates could draw in their own clash with orthodoxy.

Higher criticism began to take hold in the United States around the middle of the nineteenth century, and its effects were pervasive and pronounced. To the extent that higher criticism encouraged people to set aside the supposed history and science of the Bible, they were free to embrace the romantic, spiritual, emotive content of the text. This fostered a wave of theological liberalism, which further limbered the nation's religious culture. "In order for Scripture to retain authority," writes Ronald Satta (2007) of liberal Protestants at the time, "abandoning old notions of absolute perfection became essential." In turn, "Theories of inspiration that elevated the spiritual message of the Bible without getting buffed down in details pertaining to science and history increasingly gained currency as the century progressed" (Satta 2007, 69). Many Protestant ministers, including Horace Bushnell, David Swing, Theodore Munger, and Henry Ward Beecher, found this idea liberating. They built sizable religious followings based on the power of Christianity as a social and spiritual force rather than a historical and scientific one.

By the final decades of the nineteenth century, many Americans had become accustomed to questioning and reinterpreting the Bible. They had learned from their ministers, and from each other, to play around with sacred stories, to find new spiritual significance in a book that had long seemed fallow, and to bracket the issues that seemed to contradict new scientific discoveries, including evolution and natural selection. Ingersoll and other leaders of the freethought movement pushed many of these points beyond what theologians maintained, but their work was ultimately apiece with what Christian thinkers had been doing for decades.

Other social developments around the time also prepared the nation for freethought's surge. The horrors of the US Civil War raised pressing questions about God, evil, free will, salvation, suffering, and more. After the war, many Americans spent time questioning God's relationship to the bloody conflict. Some wondered whether the universe was as rational and ordered as they had once assumed. Others used religion, especially mainstream Protestantism, as a way of reforging national identity. What united northerners and southerners across the divide of the dead, many Americans believed, was their shared belief in God. To be sure, this unity often came at the expense of other Americans, including black Americans, who were generally excluded from north–south religious rebuilding. Shared Protestantism was a way for well-to-do white Americans to reforge what they thought of as the national character (Blum 2005).

While Protestantism remained the dominant religious tradition, new cultures of belief began to emerge across the nation. Recently emancipated slaves built an incredible number of new Protestant churches, institutionalizing the sights, sounds, and beliefs that had emerged during centuries of enslavement (Gaustad and Schmidt 2002, 217–19). At the same time, waves of immigrants brought to the country a variety of new rites, rituals, and perspectives. Tens of thousands of Catholics and Jews came to the United States as the century marched forward. But there were even stranger belief systems, at least according to Protestants of the day, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Swedenborgianism, and Theosophy. Moreover, the middle decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of America's homegrown alternative religions – Mormonism, Spiritualism, and Christian Science, to name the most prominent. As the century progressed, the ranks of these alternative religions swelled, further diversifying the nation's religious constituency. More and more people proved ready to think differently about God, heaven, and hell than what orthodox denominations had taught them (Dorrien 2001, 179).

Little wonder, then, that the freethought movement took off at the very time that American religion was growing, diversifying, and expanding. Freethought was a central part of this religious pluralism. It attracted a range of supporters, including agnostics like Ingersoll, atheists like C. B. Reynolds, and believers like Henry Ward Beecher. It also attracted suffrage leaders such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, writers such as Mark Twain and George Eliot, and free-love advocates such as Victoria Woodhull and George Francis Train. Inspired by the leadership of these noted intellectuals, ordinary Americans curious of

freethought gathered in lecture halls to consume new ideas. They also devoured a rash of recently created periodicals. In addition to the *Boston Investigator*, which had been publishing since the early 1830s, freethought ideas spread via *The Truth Seeker*, first published in 1873; *Lucifer, the Light Bearer*, first published in 1883; the *Blue Grass Blade*, first published in 1884; the *Iconoclast,* first published in 1891; and the *Free-Thought Vindicator*, first published in 1895. These periodicals were not the product of some major east-coast metropolis. They came out of such towns as Topeka, Kansas; Lexington, Kentucky; Peoria, Illinois; and Austin, Texas. Freethought's golden age was a national affair (Jacoby 2004, ch. 6).

It was also elusive. Unlike social movements with a particular objective, freethought meant lots of things to lots of people. The freethought movement included work on suffrage, education reform, penal reform, temperance, civil rights, and many other causes. What ultimately united these efforts were familiar American values – free speech, free press, the liberty of conscience, and the separation of church and state. By emphasizing these ideals, they attracted a range of supporters who held different political, social, and religious beliefs. Time-tested ideals, even though they seldom flourished in practice, proved to be the common ground that attracted diverse coalitions. That people should be allowed to think for themselves regarding matters of the divine was something that freethought advocates, liberal Christians, and many others could embrace. They could also embrace the idea that people should be allowed to publicize their ideas in a free marketplace of inquiry. And they could embrace the idea that people should be allowed to worship or not worship as they saw fit. A religious faith that could not stand up to serious questioning was no faith for courageous, independent Americans – which was precisely how many Americans at the time saw themselves.

Freedom, liberty, pluralism, inquiry, discussion – these were the traits that linked freethought to religious culture and fostered a golden age. To be sure, both freethought advocates and liberal theologians had their detractors. There were plenty of conflicts, even violent, deadly ones, over these new ideas (Postel 2016). But there was also a widespread hunger for alternative perspectives. Americans wanted to think about God, the Bible, and religious matters in new ways. Even if they remained orthodox in their beliefs, even if they returned to familiar conclusions, the process of thinking together about pressing issues was fortifying and helpful. In the pages of freethought periodicals and in the auditoriums for freethought lectures, ordinary Americans

assembled for new and varied perspectives that signaled the coming of an intellectual dawn.

The Great Agnostic

An astute and successful lawyer, a stalwart figure in the Republican Party, and a wildly popular lecturer, Ingersoll signaled just how far agnostics could go in the Golden Age of Free Thought. Reviled by many for his religious critiques, he was nonetheless a respected public figure and far more influential than any other freethought advocate (Jacoby 2013, 6–11). The central reason for his influence and place in public culture was his unmatched eloquence. For more than a quarter-century, Ingersoll was known as the greatest public speaker in the nation. After hearing him deliver a speech in 1879, Mark Twain commented that Ingersoll's oration was "the supremest combination of English words that was ever put together since the world began." Albert Beveridge, a senator whose religious beliefs were as far from Ingersoll's as possible, placed him alongside Daniel Webster, Wendell Phillips, and Patrick Henry as the four greatest orators America had produced. Walt Whitman, Clarence Darrow, Robert LaFollette, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Eugene Debs, among many others, also deemed him the greatest orator they had ever heard (Cramer 1952, 100–1). All of these plaudits accrued despite – or maybe because of – his assaults on revealed religion.

Born in 1833 in the Burned-Over District of upstate New York, Ingersoll grew up in a world enflamed with religious fervor. His father, John Ingersoll, was an itinerant minister and political radical. Ingersoll never much liked his boyhood Sundays in church, but he nonetheless revered his father. John Ingersoll was not some overbearing, stoic Puritan, but a staunch opponent of slavery and a compatriot of the revivalist Charles Finney, with whom he worked to shake up the Calvinist status quo of the era. Ingersoll's mother passed away when he was but three years old, and afterward the family moved often and in accord with his father's ministry. Along the way, Ingersoll received rather haphazard schooling in various parts of the country. Eventually he took a job teaching school in Mount Vernon, Illinois.

Quickly realizing that the life of a small-town teacher was not for him, Ingersoll thought that a career in the law might be. After reading law books on his own, working as a clerk, and shadowing local attorneys, he was admitted to the Illinois bar. Soon he relocated to Peoria – the second largest city in the state – and his practice thrived. His ambition outgrew Peoria, so he

moved to Washington, DC, then, several years later, to New York City. He became one of the nation's most celebrated, sought-after attorneys.

Ingersoll was something of an enigma as a lawyer. On the one hand, he was an elite corporate attorney, representing trusts, railroads, and conglomerates of the Gilded Age. In many ways, these were powerful economic structures that stamped out freedom and individuality – akin to the religious power structures that, Ingersoll believed, stamped out freedom and individuality in the realm of thought. In one closely watched legal case, Ingersoll served as lead attorney for the defense in the sensational Star Route Trials, which involved expansive government corruption and payoffs in rural mail routes. Ingersoll got the scheming defendants, Thomas Brady and Stephen Dorsey, acquitted of charges of corruption, prompting a public outcry that eventually led to sweeping civil-service reform. On the other hand, Ingersoll freely gave his legal time and attention to the downtrodden – to widows, the poor, and the dispossessed. He defended fellow infidels and agnostics from charges of blasphemy, which was still a crime in many states. Effectively, like any good lawyer, Ingersoll mounted a vigorous defense for whatever cases he deemed worthy (or profitable). Along the way, he earned a reputation for unparalleled courtroom oratory. Spectators packed open courtrooms to hear him speak, juries delighted at his wit, and more than a few officers of the court, including judges, felt waves of emotion wash over them when he spoke (Cramer 1952, 207).

Further bolstering his reputation for eloquence was his stump speaking for the Republican Party. While Ingersoll spoke on behalf of politicians from early in his career, it was his nomination speech for James G. Blaine at the 1876 Republican National Convention that vaulted him to the forefront of political oratory. At the convention, Ingersoll delivered what many regarded as the greatest nomination speech in history. "Like an armed warrior, like a plumed knight," Ingersoll declaimed with all the glittering imagery he could summon, "James G. Blaine marched down the halls of the American Congress and threw his shining lance full and fair against the brazen foreheads of the defamers of his country and the maligners of his honor." Though Blaine lost the nomination, Ingersoll's speech convinced many in the nation that this supposed infidel actually "possessed some key to the innermost mechanism that moves the human heart" (Smith 1990, 108). After the Blaine speech, would-be congressmen, senators, and presidents competed to get the Great Agnostic on the road promoting their candidacy.

While Ingersoll traveled often to stump for Republican candidates, he spent far more time lecturing to popular audiences. It is important to

remember that during the nineteenth century, especially from the 1830s on, public lecturing was a cultural institution in the United States (Ray 2005). It was both entertainment and education for communities large and small. In fact, public lecturing was central to the development and spread of American intellectual culture. The nation's most prominent thinkers prior to the Civil War – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Frederick Douglass, among many others – were also celebrated lecturers. They developed their ideas on the lecture circuit and in conjunction with popular audiences. In nineteenth-century lecture culture, insight, entertainment, and edification moved through the nation's auditoriums and linked disparate audiences in a shared intellectual project.

Beginning in the early 1870s, Ingersoll began earning a reputation as the most popular lecturer in the nation. The noted lecture promoter James Redpath, who helped manage Ingersoll's activities for several years, once remarked that Ingersoll "was the best card in America, no other man could draw such audiences. . . . His last house in San Francisco, I am told, had more money in it than any lecture ever yielded since lecturing began" (*Complete Lectures* 1886, 5–6). At the height of his career, Ingersoll spoke around 100–200 times per year – a number dwarfed by the tens of thousands of invitations he received. He usually lectured on dedicated tours that took him away from home for several months. The tours were grueling, but also incredibly lucrative. Tickets for an Ingersoll lecture were usually 50 cents for cheap seats and $1.50 for premium seats. Scalped tickets could go for upwards of $3 – an almost unheard-of sum for a performance in those days. In many cities, hundreds of would-be attendees were turned away at the door. All told, Ingersoll regularly made $1000 to $1500 per lecture (or around $28,000 to $38,000 in today's value). On one occasion in 1892, he netted $3500 (almost $100,000 today) for a lecture in Chicago – the largest sum he ever received for a single performance (Cramer 1952, 117–18). Critics denounced Ingersoll for making a fortune from blasphemy. In response, he thanked them for the publicity and begged them to continue their denunciations; their opposition helped put butts in seats.

Indeed, controversy was key to Ingersoll's influence, and it was central to the religious awakening he was working to foment. Local newspapers did their part to energize the community when an Ingersoll lecture was forthcoming, as when the *Cleveland Herald* (1884) publicized an impending performance by "the brilliant orator and celebrated unbeliever" who would "crowd the hall alike with sympathizers and opponents." With his performance looming, commentators sometimes wrote to the local paper warning of

his dangerous eloquence. A correspondent to the *Cincinnati Enquirer* (1879) argued that Ingersoll's "captivating phrases" of "brilliant rhetoric" masked his attempt to "batter down the belief in God and the Christian religion." Some townsfolk became so riled at the prospect of an Ingersoll lecture that they challenged him to a public debate. A man named Liston McMillen (1885), for instance, published an open letter to Ingersoll in which he promised not only to debate the Great Agnostic but also to "heal the sick," to "cast out devils," and thereby to demonstrate the truth of "a risen Redeemer."

On the day of an Ingersoll lecture, the venue and surrounding town hummed with energy. The local opera house, civic center, or auditorium usually drew a capacity crowd, and there were even reports of hopeful lecture-goers breaking windows and damaging property trying to sneak into the performance. In addition to those who waited eagerly to hear Ingersoll speak, others waited eagerly to denounce him. Members of local churches and religious organizations sometimes stood outside the auditorium and passed out Bibles to those headed inside – as when a man in Boston arrived at an Ingersoll lecture with "500 New Testaments in hand, to be given to the audience for use in verifying Mr. Ingersoll's references to the Bible" (*Daily Evening Bulletin* 1880). When the lecture was over, the host town spent several days reflecting on what had taken place. Local ministers issued stern rebukes – as when the Rev. T. Hughes told his congregants that Ingersoll's recent lecture was "blasphemy in the highest and lowest degree" and that the local paper was the "filth" and "sewer" of the city for printing the lecture and sending it into Christian homes (*St. Louis Globe Democrat* 1880). On occasion, townspeople booked the auditorium themselves to issue formal replies to the Great Agnostic. Regardless, newspapers regularly reported on Ingersoll's success. After a San Francisco lecture, for example, a local paper summarized what Ingersoll's lectures were doing across the seaboard:

> Col. Robert Ingersoll is attracting considerable attention just now from the clergy and others. He came to the Pacific and now exclaims, *veni, vidi, vici!* His trip has been financially a success; his lectures have set the whole Pacific coast to thinking, and it is said that more persons are now reading the Bible, ten to one, than before his advent to the Golden Gate City.
>
> (Quoted in the *Weekly Arizona Miner* 1877)

More people were reading the Bible. More people were thinking for themselves. More people were inquiring about religion. Ingersoll's lectures did not lead to legions of unbelievers. They led, rather, to people who felt empowered to ponder life's big questions. All of it was due to the way he

crafted his appeals. An experienced orator, he invited believers, non-believers, and everyone else to join him in deliberating about pressing religious issues. His lectures were primarily a demonstration of free inquiry designed not to argue particular conclusions but to enflame the minds of the American people.

The Great Agnostic Speaks

Ingersoll's lectures were numerous and oft-repeated. He delivered his most popular ones – including "Liberty of man, woman, and child," "The gods," "The ghosts," "Some mistakes of Moses," and "What must we do to be saved" – over several years. As a result, there is no single, definitive text of each lecture. Thankfully, Ingersoll was such an influential public figure that newspaper editors regularly sent reporters to cover and transcribe his lectures, which were then printed as lengthy, verbatim excerpts or in full. These texts contain an oral style of discourse, markers of delivery such as "laughter" and "applause," and the kind of off-handed references that were typical of live performance. Moreover, several fly-by-night book publishers effectively pirated newspaper printings of Ingersoll's lectures and bound them together in cheap books for popular sale. These publishers often did not even identify themselves or the city of publication, printing only "Published for the Trade" on the title page. Taken together, the nation's newspapers and these gray-market books provide the best surviving accounts of Ingersoll's appeals on the public stage.

While it is well-nigh impossible to explain all the ways Ingersoll inspired and delighted his audiences, his lectures regularly employed three themes, which contributed to the expansion and diversification of religious culture at the end of the nineteenth century. First, Ingersoll testified about his own beliefs, professing his agnosticism in a way that directed listener animus toward established religious institutions. Second, after testifying about his own beliefs, Ingersoll invited listeners to do the same, drawing them into religious questioning and goading them to become thinkers in their own right. Third, after drawing audience members into religious inquiry, Ingersoll pulled his position back from a sense of finality, thereby releasing audience members to arrive at their own conclusions. Playing the role of an agnostic gadfly, Ingersoll left ordinary Americans unsettled and in a position where they had to ponder the divine on their own and thus contribute to a lively, engaged culture of ideas.

To begin, consider how Ingersoll testified about his own beliefs, often stringing together a series of assertions and questions about received religious wisdom. The lecture "Some reasons why," for instance, began with Ingersoll questioning the relationship between a supposedly infinite being and finite humans: "Can I increase his happiness or decrease his misery? Does he need my strength or my life? What can I do for him? I say, nothing. For one, I do not believe there is any God who gives rain or sunshine for praying. For one, I do not believe there is any being who helps man simply because he kneels" (Ingersoll 1881). With this introduction, Ingersoll went squarely after conventions of religious belief and highlighted his own role as a free inquirer. He did something similar when he talked about reading the Bible:

> Suppose when I read it, the revelation to me, through the Bible, is that it is not true, and God knew that I would know that when I did read it, and knew, if I did not say it, I would be dishonest. Is it possible that he would damn me for being honest and give me wings if I would play the hypocrite?

In further asserting his own intellectual freedom, Ingersoll even squared off against God later in the lecture:

> If I find at the day of judgment that I have been mistaken, I will say so like a man. If God tells me then that he is the author of the Old Testament I will admit that he is worse than I thought he was, and when he comes to pronounce sentence upon me I will say to him: do unto others as you would that others do unto you.

These first-person pronouns signaled an active thinker in modern religious culture – an individual who cut to the quick of key questions and upended received wisdom.

Also important to Ingersoll's agnostic testimony was allowing audience members to see religion through his eyes, thereby unsettling their preconceived notions. For instance, when delivering "Liberty of man, woman, and child," he took the audience on an imaginative tour of the implements of torture used in Christian history, which he had viewed during a trip to Europe. "I looked at them," he explained to an audience in St. Louis in 1877, "and until I saw and examined them I never had really appreciated what had been done in this world." In his examination of these implements, Ingersoll saw the thumbscrew, which was useful for interrogating a man who "was not entirely right upon the subject of infant baptism" by slowly crushing his thumb. "I saw at the same time," he continued, "an instrument called the Collar of Torture," which involved a metal ring and hundreds of

needles around a person's neck. "Think of it; think of it!" Ingersoll declared, pushing listeners to see the brutal reality of their shared history. "And let me say right here, every man in the City of St. Louis that says 'I will not trade with that man because he differs with me about religion, I will not vote with that man because he differs with me about religion,' that man has the hellish spirit of persecution in him" (Ingersoll 1877).

Across Ingersoll's lectures, as in "Liberty of man, woman, and child," the primary target of his invective was the institutional side of religion – the churches, denominations, schools, and governments that worked to maintain their power at the expense of free inquiry. Exposing power-hungry institutions effectively gave audience members a common enemy against which they could align. In "Which way," for instance, Ingersoll barraged listeners with questions about the value of the church: "What has the church done to civilize mankind? What has the church done for us? How has it added to the prosperity of this world? Has it ever produced anything?" (Ingersoll 1886e). In "Heretics and heresies," he showed how the church used its power to "punish heresy with whip, and chain, and fire. As long as a church deems a certain belief essential to salvation, just so long it will kill and burn if it has the power" (Ingersoll 1874). In "The truth," one of the last lectures of his career, Ingersoll focused further on the clash between institutions and freethought:

> All the orthodox brains of the world cannot conceive of an argument that can be used against the freedom of thought. All the popes and all the orthodox clergy say they have a revelation from God that dominates the human reason. They say 'Read,' and then add, 'Believe or be damned.' This the glorious Protestant church calls 'liberty of thought.' (Ingersoll 1897)

In this attack on religious institutions, Ingersoll distanced his audience from whatever institutional religious affiliations they may have had and showed them the possibility of courageous critique.

Distance from religious institutions and the possibility of courageous critique were useful for Ingersoll because they created a space for listeners to become freethinkers in their own right. Thus, after testifying of his agnosticism, Ingersoll invited listeners to join him in contemplating received religious wisdom from new perspectives. "I hope and believe," he insisted at the start of "Liberty of man, woman, and child," "that you will agree with me when I say that every person has the right to form an opinion upon any subject whatever, and the right to express that opinion when formed. I claim this right for you as earnestly as for myself" (Ingersoll 1877). By putting "I" and "you" in relationship around freethought and free speech, Ingersoll

invited audience members to join him in a marketplace of ideas designed to advance human society through robust intellectual exchange. "Every human being should be mentally honest," he said in "The truth." "Every human being should preserve the veracity of his soul, unbiased by hatred or love. Truth is not dangerous. Error is" (Ingersoll 1897). Free and open debate, unbiased opinions, mental honesty – these were the hallmarks Ingersoll envisioned for America in the new century.

Perhaps the best example of Ingersoll's invitation to intellectual engagement came in his lecture "Individuality." The title of the lecture, like almost all appeals to individualism, was somewhat ironic in that it beckoned people to become individuals together – to join as a group around the notion of individualism (Stob 2014). "On every hand," the lecture began, "are the enemies of individuality and mental freedom" (Ingersoll 1886c). Unsurprisingly, these enemies were the religious institutions of the day – the figures and forces of mainstream establishments that denied free speech and free inquiry in the spiritual realm. After discussing how powerful institutions worked to maintain their power by stifling independent thought, Ingersoll turned the point directly to his listeners: "Nearly all people stand in great horror of annihilation, and yet to give up your individuality is to annihilate yourself. Mental slavery is mental death and every man who has given up his intellectual freedom is the living coffin of his dead soul" (Ingersoll 1886c). Of course, proud Americans in the late nineteenth century would have scoffed at whatever threatened their individuality and intellectual freedom – especially mental slavery and mental death. Their duty, however, was not just to avoid mental slavery and death but "to think and act for yourself" (Ingersoll 1886c). It was a call for lecture-goers to make something of themselves in the realm of thought, belief, and action. This was the point on which Ingersoll ended the lecture:

> Surely there is grandeur in knowing that in the realm of thought, at least, you are without a chain; that you have the right to explore all heights and all depths; that their [sic] are no walls, nor fences, nor prohibited places, nor sacred corners in all the vast expanse of thought; that your intellect owes no allegiance to any being human or Divine; that you hold all in fee and upon no condition and by no tenure whatever; that in the world of mind you are relieved from all personal dictation, and from the ignorant tyranny of majorities. Surely it is worth something to feel that there are no priests, no popes, no parties, no governments, no kings, no gods to whom your intellect can be compelled to pay a reluctant homage. (Ingersoll 1886c)

Here was a plea that almost everyone, regardless of religious beliefs, could accept. It was a plea for freedom, liberty, anti-slavery, and individuality. Because Ingersoll based his position in quintessentially American ideals, he called together a diverse array of people interested in bringing these values to the religious realm, just as they had brought them to the political realm.

Beckoning to ordinary Americans as freethinking individuals was a crucial part of Ingersoll's appeal because it was flexible and accommodating. Notice at the end of "Individuality" that Ingersoll never said what people ought to believe about the divine. He never said what creed they ought to affirm. He said only that people ought not to be compelled to believe or profess what went against their personal commitments. Across Ingersoll's lectures, in fact, there was a strategic pattern of restraint – that is, of Ingersoll stopping short of definite conclusions about religion, God, the supernatural, and systems of belief. To be sure, Ingersoll offered his own thoughts, but he left questions about belief open-ended for his religiously diverse audiences.

One way he stopped his claims short of definitive conclusions was by turning agnosticism back on himself and others like him. In "The gods," for instance, he explained the limitedness of his own position:

> We do not say that we have discovered all; that our doctrines are the all in all in truth. . . . We are not endeavoring to chain the future, but to free the present. We are not forging fetters for our children, but we are breaking those our fathers made for us. We are the advocates of inquiry, of investigation and thought. (Ingersoll 1886b)

In "Orthodoxy," he made a similar, though more humorous, agnostic turn: "I don't say there is no God. I don't know. As I have said before, this is the only planet I was ever on. I live in one of the rural districts of the universe." Later, when discussing Jesus' healing miracles, Ingersoll similarly joked: "I don't know. There is one wonderful thing about the dead people that were raised – we don't hear of them any more. What became of them? Why, if there was a man in this town that had been raised from the dead, I would go to see him to-night." At the conclusion of the lecture, he once again affirmed his agnosticism in a way that resisted finality:

> I say honestly we do not know, we cannot say. We cannot say whether death is a wall or a door; the beginning or end of a day; the spreading of pinions to soar or the folding forever of wings; whether it is the rising or the setting of a sun, or an endless life that brings rapture and love to every one – we do not know; we cannot say.

Ultimately, agnostics like Ingersoll "leave the dead with Nature, the mother of us all, under a seven-hued bow of hope" (Ingersoll 1886d).

This kind of agnostic hope went even further, however. At times, Ingersoll's lectures became downright religious in tone and texture, as he deployed religious language in new and liberal ways. In "The ghosts," he affirmed what he called "true religion," which was a form of religion he welcomed into the intellectual utopia he envisioned:

> True religion must be free; without liberty the brain is a dungeon and the mind the convict. The slave may bow and cringe and crawl, but he cannot worship, he cannot adore. True religion is the perfume of the free and grateful air. True religion is the subordination of the passions to the intellect. It is not a creed; it is a life. (Ingersoll 1886a)

Similarly, "Foundations of faith" concluded with a perfectly agnostic statement of hope in the divine: "Let us hope that if there be a God He is wise and good. Let us hope that if there be another life it will bring peace and joy to all the children of men. Let us hope that this poor earth on which we live may be a perfect world – a world without a crime, without a tear" (Ingersoll 1895). This sense of open-ended possibility cut across religious divides and connected brilliantly with the pluralism, diversity, and liberalism in American religion of the late nineteenth century.

Conclusion

In cities and towns across the country, Ingersoll proffered his own beliefs. He critiqued religious institutions, doctrines, and creeds, and he played with received wisdom to waken and energize his listeners. He then invited them to join him as free inquirers – as individuals ready and willing to think for themselves, to pursue new ideas, and to share their thoughts in a robust marketplace of ideas. Yet he left the door open for various belief systems – so long as those systems were not dictated or compelled. Believers could join with him if belief in the divine was their honest thought. Atheists could join with him if unbelief was their honest thought. So long as they had put in the effort to inquire, to deliberate, to weigh evidence, to consider all sides, they could link up as liberated individuals in America's expanding religious culture.

This was, more or less, the message Ingersoll offered for a quarter-century. It was a wildly popular message, judging by the audiences he attracted, but it was unfortunately fragile. When Ingersoll passed away in July 1899,

commentators praised his eloquence, lamented his attacks on Christianity, and/or celebrated the spirit of human kindness that pervaded his work. Yet many knew that he occupied a unique place in American history, and his influence was unlikely to remain beyond his death. Perhaps the *Cincinnati Commercial-Tribune* put the point best when reflecting on Ingersoll's life:

> Whether right or wrong, he truly believed what he advocated, and this genuine belief was the secret of the power he exercised upon his audiences. It is not likely that his writings, divested of the charm of his personal eloquence, will survive as standard arguments against Christian apologetics. His power dies with him.
>
> (*Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, quoted in *Denver Evening Post*, 1899)

The prediction was surprisingly accurate. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, Americans generally knew the name Robert Green Ingersoll. Whether they celebrated or reviled him, he influenced the nation's conversations about religion, freedom, inquiry, and humanity. Today, few know Ingersoll's name. Part of the reason has to do with the surge of fundamentalism that began in the early twentieth century, marginalizing the contributions of Ingersoll and other agnostics. Yet another part of the reason has to do with the vibrant religious culture of which Ingersoll was a part. The Golden Age of Free Thought was golden because Americans in the late nineteenth century proved eager to ponder religious questions and to debate the divine. Religious inquiry at the time vibrated with the intellectual energy of the nation. When Ingersoll died, that energy continued, but there were few other orators capable of fostering broad coalitions of believers and non-believers. Agnosticism, of course, did not go away with Ingersoll's passing. But the common ground Ingersoll found and forged passed with him. Religious culture continued to expand and diversify, but it also fragmented and moved in directions Ingersoll would have abhorred.

Nevertheless, Ingersoll remains a figure who demands attention. Today it is hard to imagine that the most celebrated orator in the final quarter of the nineteenth century and the most sought-after stump speaker for the Republican Party was also the Great Agnostic. Ingersoll's visibility, influence, and eloquence requires more attention today than ever before, not because of the answers he provided, but because of the questions he asked – and because he got a diverse array of Americans interested in grappling with those questions. Ultimately, the broad coalition he built remains the defining characteristic of his legacy and among the most intriguing dimensions of the Golden Age of Free Thought.

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Early Women's Movement

SUVI KARILA

Introduction

The history of atheism and its relationship with women has been a rocky one; the continuing schism between feminism and atheism has been a staple from the early days of atheism as a social movement. This has puzzled many, since the two movements have often seemed to share common interests, but despite this outward compatibility, women have struggled to find their place and have their voices heard within the movement (Miller 2013). When the history of unbelief has been written, the perspective has continued to be that of a white male. This chapter is driven by the question: what can we learn when we look at the history of atheism from the perspective of women?

Non-religion seems to be a strongly gendered phenomenon across cultures and time. Women are not only less likely to be non-religious, but they practice their non-religiousness differently from men. This is especially true when it comes to the label 'atheist': non-religious women are and have been far less likely than men to identify as atheists (Mahlamäki 2012, 60–1). In this chapter we see that this gendered nature of both non-religion and religion was something that already the freethinkers of the nineteenth century paid attention to, and it had various implications for not only the earliest heroines of transatlantic freethought but for the early movement as a whole.

The focus of this chapter is on both the development of freethought in the United States and that of British secularism. While these movements on the opposite sides of the Atlantic had their own distinct sociopolitical frameworks and contexts, many ideas, texts, and people travelled and connected these national activities into a wider transatlantic freethought movement that often considered itself to be working towards the common goal of a secular future, as was the case with many of the reform movements of the era. Both national movements reached their golden years around the same decades of the latter

part of the nineteenth century, and faced a slow decline in activity with the dawn of World War I. The new definitions of femininity and masculinity, and the question of women's piety and its possible influence on the desired secular future were also central to both movements, which is why it is useful to look at the history of atheism and women as a part of this wider transnational context.

The freethinker or secularist women highlighted in this chapter did not all consider themselves atheist, but they are an important thread in this part of the history of atheism, and also reflect the complexity of the lived experience of female non-religion and the many ways in which women practice it.

Owenism and Fanny Wright, the Earliest Heroine of Freethought

From the nineteenth century onward, the history of atheism moved to a new era when scattered religious sceptics began to organize into social and political movements that operated under the names of freethought and, later in the century, secularism and liberalism. These movements had their roots in eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy and the development of deism, and followed their strong emphasis on reason and inquiry. Freethinkers themselves also actively traced their history to this previous era and celebrated its most radical heroes from Thomas Paine (1737–1809) and his controversial pamphlet *Age of Reason* (1794) to Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97). While Wollstonecraft herself was not an atheist or even a deist, her radical text arguing for rational education for women, *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), was an inspiration for many freethinker feminists of the following century.[1]

The first movement of the nineteenth century to attract freethinker feminists both in Britain and in the United States was Owenism, a utopian socialist philosophy envisioned by Robert Owen (1771–1858). Owen, a Welsh-born textile manufacturer and social reformer, had a deep interest in the welfare of workers and children's education from early on in his career. From 1813 onward, he began to write and develop his philosophy, mixing utilitarianism and the views of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the effects

1 Mary Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin, was a well-known atheist, as was their daughter, Mary Shelley, known better as the writer of *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). Despite Wollstonecraft's evident radicalism and feminist philosophy, her own texts do not suggest that she ever lost her belief in a personal god (see Taylor 2003, 95–7, 127).

of the environment and education on human character with a strong critique of capitalism and private property. While Owenism was not an atheist movement as such, many of its members were atheists and Owen himself was critical of organized religion (Taylor 1983, 123, 143). In its later years, though, the movement's leaders in England tried to distance Owenism from the most militant forms of atheism in an effort to become more respectable, which alienated some of the more radical members from the movement, including British atheist-feminist Emma Martin.[2]

As in matters of religion, Owen took a radical stance on the issue of marriage and the role of women in his new moral world. In Owen's view, the traditional marriage with its various domestic duties assigned to women at home prevented them from cultivating their true abilities as rational beings. Women needed to be educated and freed from this enslavement for them to take their place aside men as their political equals. What made Owen even more revolutionary was that he began to implement his thoughts. In 1825, Owen sailed across the Atlantic and launched his first cooperative community experiments in the United States. Though these communities were short-lived and failed to ever realize the egalitarian vision into a lived reality (Kolmerten 1990), Owenism, with its ideals of freedom of speech and political action for both sexes, was the first movement to attract and provide an open platform for a few brave freethinker women.

The first to enter the spotlight and lecture for Victorian audiences on freethought was Scottish-born radical reformer Frances 'Fanny' Wright D'Arusmont (1795–1852). Wright, born into a life of privilege, but feeling constrained by the traditional commands of propriety surrounding her early life as a girl in Tory England, dedicated her life to both advancement of women's rights and abolishment of slavery in the United States. After witnessing Owen's experiment in New Harmony, Indiana, during her travels in the New World, the young Wright was inspired to establish her own utopian settlement. Like that of New Harmony, Nashoba Community, based in Tennessee, was to become a fully egalitarian community, but its main purpose was to serve as an instrument of emancipation for slaves through a system in which they could buy their own freedom. From 1825 to 1828, the

2 Emma Martin (1811/12–51) began her career as a lecturer for Owenism after her conversion during a series of debates with Owenite Alexander Campbell. Her brief career from 1839 to 1845 was filled with radicalism of the most outspoken kind, which eventually led her to leave the movement. English secularist leader George Holyoake's eulogy of Martin celebrated her strong stance for atheism until the end, claiming she even devoted her final hours to giving her critique on Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu* (Life of Jesus) (see Taylor 1983, 130–5; Schwartz 2013, 47–8).

small commune struggled to realize its ideals and survive financially, eventually collapsing.

After the failed experiment, Wright directed her efforts to influencing society through public speaking and writing. Together with Robert Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, she edited and wrote for the *Free Enquirer*, a controversial freethinking paper addressing various hot-button issues from the importance of women's education and new property and divorce laws to matters of women's sexuality. Wright, who described herself as 'a member of the human family', became known for her agnosticism and attacks on religious institutions, earning her many epithets like the 'Red Harlot of Infidelity' and 'the female Tom Paine'. She spoke on the waste of religion as it focused on issues of the 'unseen worlds' beyond our reach, and called for men and women to 'Turn your churches into halls of science, and devote your leisure day to the study of your own bodies, the analysis of your own minds' (Wright 1829, 46). Wright herself did exactly this, turning an abandoned church that she bought into a Hall of Science, a dedicated shrine for rationalism.

While Wright's writing and radical topics were scandalous enough, her lecture series from 1828 onward – standing on public stages, in front of mixed audiences, in her bloomers, demanding racial and sexual equality and opening of the intellectual political participation for not only her but all women – provoked intense fury. In the press, Wright was attacked and scorned, not only for her views, but for simply being a woman on a public stage, and her name was moulded into a label of 'Wrightism' that for decades to come would be used by the orthodox as a dreaded weapon against radical women to silence and marginalize their voices. The concept effectively linked immoral sexual behaviour and irreligion, invoking fears of these 'whores of Babylon' threatening the social order and stability of the domestic sphere (Ginzberg 1994, 216–17). Writing about Wright over twenty years after her death in *Heroines of Freethought* (1876), American freethinker Sara Underwood noted:

> They said she was an 'Infidel,' – This was made the basis of the hue and cry against her, though the true meaning of it was, that simple-minded men were scared out of their wits lest their wives should learn from her example something that would induce them to question masculine supremacy.
>
> (Underwood 1876, 216–17)

Despite the attacks, Wright continued to travel and work, but in her later years she withdrew from the public sphere both due to personal tragedies and

because her notoriety had made efficient lecturing a virtual impossibility both in her native land and in the United States. While her scorned name and reputation lived on the lips of the orthodox press and the freethinker women praising her, after her early death in the winter of 1852 it did not take long for memory of Wright to fade. Despite her groundbreaking life and work as a reformer, she was virtually forgotten in the early twentieth century.

Sceptic Women and the Domestic Ideology

The strong reactions against Wright speak not only of her radicalism, but also of the fears that a woman's presence in the public sphere still provoked in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Much of this was due to changes in the intellectual landscape after the Industrial Revolution and the cultural shift that had resulted in a newly found emphasis in the Victorian world on gender difference and domestic ideology, the idea of separate spheres, where (white) men and women with their different sets of natural tendencies and abilities were considered suitable for different spheres in society. The public sphere, with its immoral turmoil, the active world of politics, and economics, became a threat from which the frail and passive woman needed to be protected; a woman's gifts, her purity and nurturing nature, were best suited for the privacy of the home.

One of 'True Woman's' most precious gifts was her piety. This woman's higher nature put her on a two-sided pedestal. Due to her natural religiousness, she was to be the moral guardian of the home and family, and through this domestic work, the whole nation. On the other hand, her frailty and tendency towards emotionalism kept closed to her the doors open for the naturally more controlled, rational men. These ideals hardly resembled any sort of lived reality of women in the nineteenth-century transatlantic world, least of all women of the lower classes who did not have the luxury of choosing not to work, even if that was what they wanted. Yet these ideals and narratives lived in the public imagination, and they had concrete consequences, especially for the non-religious women of this era.

Irreligion as such was, of course, an ever-looming threat that the clergy warned about even if there was a mere suspicion of infidelity. However, the number of actual 'infidels' in the early decades of the nineteenth century was very small. The number of such women was even smaller, but nevertheless, female unbelief in Victorian Christian imagery was perceived as a threat far greater than their rarity suggested. Women like Frances Wright, from the point of view of separate-sphere supporters, seemed to embody the antithesis

of 'True Womanhood'. In revoking their belief in God, they also revoked their own gender: 'Fanny Wright is no woman – mother though she be' (Daniels 1840, 112), roared *Ladies Companion* in 1840, describing the horrors of female atheism. Similar feelings were still described thirty-five years later:

> A woman may as well be without heart as without religion, and there are few men, however irreligious themselves, but would shrink from impiety in woman. It involves a coldness and hardness of character offensive both to taste and feeling. The mere suspicion of irreligion lowers a woman in general esteem – it implies almost a reflection on her character. (Stagg 1875, 3–4)

The lived experiences of the few women who let their godless worldview be known publicly, and especially those who wrote or spoke for the freethought movement, followers of 'Wrightism', were often predominated by suspicion, scorn, and othering by general society. Sometimes nasty words on a page or circulating rumours about 'she-devils' and 'witches' turned into physical violence. For example, Owenite lecturer Margaret Chappelsmith (1806–83), active on both sides of the Atlantic, was greeted by a furious mob of women who threw stones at her in Scotland (Taylor 1983, 189). While many freethinker women had happy family lives or even freethinking husbands who supported their activism, the social stigma carried by the label 'infidel' could make it harder for a woman to find a spouse or could sour existing family relations.[3] It is not surprising that many faced feelings of loneliness and isolation – even at the height of the freethought movement, it was unlikely for a freethinker woman to find herself surrounded by many other members of the same conviction. Freethinker women found support in other radical circles, but often the company of radicals came with a price.

Abolitionism and Freethought

It was not only the most orthodox voices that would raise suspicion against non-religious women. On the contrary, sometimes the most hurtful attacks came from the progressive side, from reformers who supported all sorts of radical issues but refused to be associated with 'infidels' for fear of being labelled one. The major reform movements of the era, the abolitionist movement and the early women's rights movement, fostered a great number of anticlerical voices, such as William Lloyd Garrison and Lucretia Mott,

3 Laura Schwartz notes in *Infidel Feminism* that the lives of freethinker feminists in England were often marked by unconventional family arrangements as well as financial instability (Schwartz 2013, 49).

repeatedly challenging churches and their moral authority, but still maintaining a deep sense of religiousness and personal faith (Jacoby 2004, 69–70).[4] Within these movements, a number of radical sceptic women also spoke on these hot-button issues of the day, but struggled to find acceptance as scepticism that went beyond anticlericalism was not perceived well by either the general public or the many radical members of these movements.

This was felt by Ernestine L. Rose (1810–92), an atheist daughter of a wealthy Polish rabbi whose life embodies the history of the transatlantic freethought movement and its overlap with reform movements. Rose spent most of her adult life in the United States, speaking on behalf of freethought, abolitionism, and women's rights from 1836 to 1869. Originally, she travelled to America from England to join one of the Owenite communities, following in the footsteps of Frances Wright. While she continued to speak on behalf of Owenite principles and stayed closely connected to the movement, she settled in New York City instead and connected with the burgeoning American freethought movement.

Whereas Wright was the first woman to take the public stage as a political lecturer in front of mixed audiences in the United States, Rose was the first one to speak on human rights while identifying clearly and explicitly as an atheist. Thanks to her above-average schooling for a girl, she learned to read religious texts in Hebrew and the importance of good argumentation and debate. Contrary to her rabbi father's intentions, his religious teachings led young Rose to ponder upon questions of the origin of evil and the nature of belief, and, eventually, to abandon God completely and embrace atheism.

In her speeches, Rose highlighted atheism as the most ethical moral code as it was not based on fear of punishment, but on the pure desire to do good. While many, if not most, freethinkers shrank from the epithet 'infidel', Rose embraced it wholeheartedly. In the 1845 convention organized in honour of Robert Owen, Rose strongly argued for the name 'Infidel Convention' to be adopted in an effort to render the term's feared power useless. The name was accepted, though it did very little to turn 'infidel' into a generally adopted synonym for progress and reform.

Rose's unapologetic atheism was well known in reformer circles and not everyone welcomed the negative attention it brought. Rose was never fully

4 It is important to note that for many women the separate-spheres ideology was not a stifling set of ideals: on the contrary, it provided a sense of moral duty and agency, and many early feminists also used it to their advantage to argue for women's rights. Even many of the most radical freethinker feminists had their first experiences in activism, including public speaking, in their religious communities.

a part of even the radical, anticlerical wing of the abolitionist movement, even if she actively spoke on behalf of and fully supported its cause. Some commented on her speeches with thinly veiled jabs at her lack of belief, if the speeches were even reported in the abolitionist papers like *Liberator*. Susan B. Anthony commented on this lack of enthusiasm for Rose in an 1854 letter to the *Liberator*'s editor, William Lloyd Garrison: 'Can it be possible that its editor's love for the poor down-trodden slave is so weak as to allow the prejudices of sect or sex to hold it in abeyance?' The same year, at the National Women's Rights Convention in Philadelphia, Rose's appointment as the president of the convention was openly objected to due to her atheism. In her speech *A Defence of Atheism*, delivered in Boston in 1861 and published twenty years later, Rose (1881, 20) took a swipe at these types of attacks:

> some of the reformers, not having the moral courage to avow their own sentiments, wishing to be popular, fearing least their reforms would be considered Infidel, (as all reforms assuredly are,) shield themselves from the stigma, by joining in the tirade against Atheism – This is false, and they know it.

Eventually, despite decades of reform activities for several causes, Rose's fate, like Frances Wright's before her, was to become one of the forgotten figures in the histories of abolitionism and women's rights. Rose spent the last decades of her life in the UK, taking part in the efforts of the British Atheist Association, and periodically writing for the transatlantic women's rights movement in close connection to her reformer colleagues and friends, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The Early Women's Rights Movement and Freethought

History's different treatment of Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), leaders of the early women's rights movement in the United States, illustrates the way religious scepticism on the one hand guided the radical reform efforts of many women in these movements, but when expressed publicly, also excluded them from the appreciation reserved to those with less controversial views. While Anthony's leadership role has been a staple in the writing of the history of the women's rights movement from its early days, and her life's work was even respected with a celebration at the White House as she turned 80, the legacy of Stanton had to be

reintroduced into the historiography of early feminism closer to the twenty-first century after a century of silence and ignorance.

How did this come to be the case, after decades of joint reform efforts by these women? When the two women met in 1851, Stanton had already been active in organizing the famous first woman's rights convention of Seneca Falls in 1848. It did not take long for their friendship to develop into a collaboration that became one of the driving forces behind the early women's rights movement until Stanton's death in 1902. Stanton was the writer and argumentative power of the duo, whereas Anthony, who never married or had children, travelled and publicly presented lectures her friend and mother of seven had prepared. In 1869, the two established the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), a more radical wing of the women's movement. They also worked together with freethinker Matilda Joslyn Gage (1826–98) to write the story of the movement into a book published in six volumes under the title *History of Woman Suffrage* (1881–1922).

As the two worked towards woman enfranchisement, their views on religion and most notably its role in their efforts begun to drift apart. Anthony, raised a Quaker, mostly spoke on reform work as her gospel, following Thomas Paine's famous 'to do good, is my religion'. Her private views according to Stanton were 'agnostic', much like her own, but while publicly critical towards orthodox views of religion, Anthony never reached the sceptic zeal that defined Stanton's reform work in her later years. On the contrary, Anthony tried to veer the whole movement towards a less radical stance on religion and was the force behind the merge of the NWSA, led by Stanton, Gage, and Anthony, with the more moderate AWSA in 1890. This created friction between the women, which intensified after Stanton's most controversial work, the transatlantic effort *Woman's Bible*, appeared in the late 1890s.

A direct attack on the biblical portrayal of women as an obstacle to women's emancipation, *Woman's Bible* went a lot further than earlier biblical criticism of Christian feminists such as Lucretia Mott. In her writing, Stanton, alluding to the dominant domestic ideology, argued that most women of the Bible were so defamed that their portrayals offered nothing for the nineteenth-century woman and, more radically, in their immorality they proved that the idea of the Bible's divine origin was false. Exceptions to the rule were the few more radical women of the Bible, most notably Eve, whose story Stanton used as an example of an emancipated woman in pursuit of knowledge.

Stanton's colleagues did not react well to the publication of *Woman's Bible*. Many considered it a mistake and unhelpful to the movement, doing their best to distance the women's movement from Stanton's work. Anthony continued to publicly support her friend against the attacks, but privately she acknowledged their differing views on the topic of religion and emancipation: 'You say "women must be emancipated from their superstitions before enfranchisement will be of any benefit," and I say just the reverse, that the women must be enfranchised before they can be emancipated from their superstitions' (Harper 1898, 857).

Despite Anthony's public support, eventually Stanton found herself on the sidelines of the movement she had helped to build. Her accomplishments in the suffrage movement were written out of its history for a long time, while Anthony's moderate views were applauded, and her legacy celebrated. In her later years, Stanton used her voice more in the ranks of the freethought movement that towards the latter part of the nineteenth century attracted more and more women.

Freethinkers and the Woman Question

What was it like for women in the freethought movement? The development of Owenism in the 1820s overlapped and preceded the emergence of freethought movements that continued to grow and thrive on both sides of the Atlantic, after the popularity of Owenism collapsed in the 1840s. The establishment of Thomas Paine birthday celebrations first in 1818 in England and seven years later in the United States marked the starting point of the new activities after the relatively quiet years at the turn of the century. For the first twelve years of these celebrations in the United States, women generally did not participate, 'for it was supposed that no lady would be identified with the principles of Thomas Paine' (Ginzberg 1994, 210). Later, women began to take part in dancing, and eventually in more serious parts of the programming. The turning point came in the United States in 1840, when among a few other women Ernestine L. Rose gave a celebratory toast.

In principle, the freethought platform celebrated freedom of speech, advocated for a free press, and was open to women on both sides of the Atlantic. Following the tradition of Owenism, women were not only welcomed as passive members reduced to supporting roles such as fundraising, but as active lecturers and writers, sometimes even for executive roles in freethought societies, which was not typical in many radical societies (Schwartz 2013, 42–3). Freethinker women were often celebrated in the freethought press,

with their successes and writing highlighted. However, in practice, like in the case of the abolitionist and the women's rights movement, the combination of atheism and being a woman was controversial.

Freethinkers, despite their radicalism, did not always escape the popular psyche of the time that considered rationalism inherently a male trait, and thus made the principles of freethought even antagonistic to the essence of being a woman. Some also feared that the spectacle of a female atheist lecturer challenging her male opponent on the Bible brought too much negativity to the already precarious reputation of the movement. It has been suggested that the ambivalence towards women of antebellum American freethinkers made the situation worse as it left the women more vulnerable to attacks on their virtue (Ginzberg 1994, 209). Even the English secularist leader George Holyoake, who was a great ally for many freethinker women, criticized those freethinker women who did not conduct themselves 'ladylike'.

It is also worth noting that while many freethinker women found the intellectual culture of the movement stimulating, the low number of women might be explained partly by the freethought movement's emphasis on debates, putting its culture at odds with traditional Victorian virtues (Schwartz 2013, 43). In England, the freethinker feminist Florence Fenwick Miller (1854–1935) challenged the whole idea of emotion as the enemy of the secular movement. She placed emphasis on rituals and rites and argued that without offering the emotional support that religion offered, the secular movement would never triumph among the masses (Schwartz 2013, 121).

The ambivalence continued when the freethought movement began to consider the issue of women voting. What most agreed was that Christianity was at the core of women's oppression, and they challenged the notion that Christianity had benefited women, even suggesting women had had it better before Christianity. Many freethinkers fully supported women's right to vote, including male freethought leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet some freethinkers were not sure if, with a few educated exceptions, women in general could really break from the yoke of superstition. Consequently, some freethinkers, despite their radicalism, were suspicious of women's suffrage: the woman who had the right to vote and would follow her 'natural instincts' that swayed her towards religion could jeopardize the hope for a secular future. Even some freethinker women argued against their own right to vote based on these fears, suggesting the time for women to vote was yet to come (Kirkley 2000, 123–4).

These ideas influenced discussions over the priorities of the movement: was the woman question the key to the movement's success, as women's emancipation from their role as the 'supporters of preachers and pope' would help to bring forward a secular future? Even if not all freethinkers agreed whether biological determinism or historical developments were to blame for women's position in society, most supported the vote eventually, but they did not necessarily think freethinkers as a movement should take the issue as their priority as it would be a natural consequence when people 'converted' to atheism. Many freethinker feminists did not share this view; many thought it was necessary for the movement to help emancipate women from the bondage of religion.

Perhaps due to the ambivalence, some women felt the need to organize among themselves. In Britain, the Ladies' Secularist Association was formed in 1876. In the United States, American freethinker-feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage (1826–98), who continues to be a less known figure of the nineteenth-century women's rights movement, formed the Woman's National Liberal Union in 1890 to advance women's right to self-government through an explicitly secular agenda.[5] However, partly due to Gage's strong-willed, but also conflict-provoking personality that attracted criticism from fellow freethinkers, the Union disappeared from the freethought map after only one convention (Kirkley 2000, 110–13).

Finally, it is also worth noting that many freethinker women did not join the secular movement at all. For example, in Britain, outspoken freethinker Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy (1833–1918) was active only in the women's movement, though she did have close connections to the National Secular Society (Schwartz 2013, 62–3).

Women, Science, and the Golden Age of Freethought

The last decades before the turn of the century have been defined as the Golden Age of Freethought (Jacoby 2004, 151, 155–7). The era was marked by

5 From a very early age, growing up in Cicero, New York, Matilda Joslyn Gage was exposed to radicalism through her parents, whose home was part of the Underground Railroad. She was the youngest speaker at the National Women's Rights Convention of 1852 in Syracuse and dedicated her whole life to advancing women's suffrage and other reform causes. Much like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, her freethought-based views were not always appreciated by her fellow suffragists. In 1893 she published *Woman, Church, and State*, which summarized her views of Christianity's role in the oppression of women. Gage was also deeply interested in esoteric knowledge.

an influx of freethought periodicals and a vibrant lecture circuit that both enraged and attracted people from outside the movement to witness the audacity of the speakers and the whole spectacle of freethought. One thing driving this new level of activity was developments in the field of science, especially the new evolutionary science. For freethinker feminists, male-dominated science proved both a friend and a foe. The mainstream public, led by male scientists, were mostly interested in proving that the ideas of the separate-spheres ideology were based in science, thus supporting the status quo of a society where women's position was inferior (Hamlin 2014, 67–9). Freethinker feminists thus had to argue not only against religious arguments of women's inferior position, but against the arguments made by many scientists as well. Many did, using natural evolution as a weapon to support women's rights (Hamlin 2014).

Many freethinker feminists, as freethinkers in general, actively read scientific literature and wrote about their observations. Among the most successful was Helen H. Gardener (1853–1925), also one of the most famous American freethinker-feminist orators and writers of the era. Unlike many freethinking women, Gardener gained some recognition in the field of science. She became mostly known for her dedication to the study of differences between men's and women's brains, crystallized in a paper 'Sex in Brain', presented at the Woman's International Congress in 1888. Her dedication and belief in science continued even in death: her brain was donated to scientific research to finally prove there were no detectable differences between the brains of the two sexes (Hamlin 2014, 57–9).

Much less known, but in her own right a major figure of the era, was Elmina D. Slenker (1827–1908), who went further than many feminists of the era, using science as a witness to woman's superiority over men. From a teenager until her death, she was a very prolific writer of the American freethought movement. Her wide-ranging contributions included everything from Bible criticism to short stories to editing her own paper, *Little Freethinker*, dedicated to freethinker children.[6] Slenker's numerous writings reflect her passionate and personal relationship with science. In addition to helping her husband with the work at the mill and raising children, she

6 Slenker and freethinker Susan Wixon were the main writers for freethinker children in the major American freethought papers *Boston Investigator* and *Truth Seeker*. Both in Britain and the United States, there were efforts to compete with churches by offering not only things to read instead of the Bible, but also educational and recreational activities like secular Sunday schools. The field of education offered venues for women to live out their atheism in a more traditionally 'feminine' way (Kirkley 2000, 102–6; Schwartz 2013, 43).

studied on the subjects of evolution and natural sciences, as well as more pseudoscientific theories of the day. In her fiction writing, describing freethinker women's struggles, science has replaced religion in freethinkers' homes and daily lives. Finally, it should be noted that parts of her work also reflect the unfortunate tendency of freethinkers' supposed dedication to science and reason sometimes leading to outright racist directions.

Freethought and the Rise of Esotericism

The heyday of the freethought movement coincided and intertwined with the rise of esoteric interest in the United States and Europe, first with the spiritualist movement from the 1840s onwards, and later Theosophy in the 1870s.[7] In a world in which traditional beliefs and worldviews were questioned by the new discoveries of science, spiritualism and Theosophy provided spiritual guidance suitable for the modern age. Both movements had strong ties to reform movements of the era, including the freethought movement, as many of its major figures became interested in esoteric knowledge in their later years.

Spiritualists believed it was possible to contact the dead in séances, via methods such as tapping on the table or automatic writing. Women had a special role in these sessions and within the movement in general: 'naturally' spiritual women could not only participate, but claimed many of the movement's leadership roles and positions. Yet there should not be assumed to be a natural connection between spiritualism and feminism: it had to be created within the context of spiritualism, which is to say spiritualism was not inherently feminist. Nevertheless, spiritualism during the last decades of the nineteenth century did become a venue of agency for many women in search of a path to more influence in society, including freethinker women. Like many Christian feminists, spiritualist feminists used the different spheres ideology to argue for more agency for women. Women were the guardians of morals, and their influence was needed everywhere in society.

However, it was not only women who followed spiritualism and not all supported it. For many freethinker feminists, the shift of freethinkers towards esotericism was unacceptable. Margaret Chappelsmith was publicly very

7 The history of modern spiritualism is usually traced back to the ideas of Emmanuel Swedenborg, but the nineteenth-century spiritualists marked the 'rappings' claimed to have been heard by the American Fox sisters in 1847–8 as the first breakthrough to the spirit world and the starting point of their movement. Theosophy drew from spiritualism and mysticism, merging these ideas with influences from Asian religious traditions.

critical of the Owenite leader Robert Dale Owen's conversion to spiritualism. American reformer Lucy N. Colman (1817–1906) was herself originally a spiritualist, but she became disillusioned with the movement after she felt her fellow spiritualists focused more on the influence of spirits than the cause of abolitionism. Colman, who in her later years dedicated her reform efforts to freethought, began to call the rapid spread of spiritualism 'an outbreak of a disease', despite still maintaining close friendships with its most fervent supporters, including Amy Post. Elmina D. Slenker travelled on the east coast to take part in séances to disclaim their scientific nature and was at odds with the spiritualist paper *Banner of Light*.

For those freethinkers who were interested in spiritualism, some of whom called themselves materialist spiritualists, their conversion to spiritualism was a very natural progression of the reasons that had led them to freethought in the first place. In a century in which science took enormous leaps to open human inquiry into completely new areas of knowledge, finally reaching the realm of the dead was not that farfetched. For freethinkers such as Sara A. Underwood, spiritualism was a form of the most cutting-edge science, revealing the secrets from beyond this world. Underwood promoted her views to fellow freethinkers with her husband in *Automatic or Spirit Writing, with Other Psychic Experiences* (1895). In the book, Underwood described the couple's encounter with the former editor of the major American freethought paper, *Boston Investigator*, claiming the late editor now preached for spiritualism from beyond the grave.

Much like Underwood, British activist Annie Besant (1847–1933) faced a lot of criticism after her conversion from militant atheism to Theosophy. Originally raised pious by her Anglican family, and married at the age of twenty to a clergyman, Besant found her faith rattled by the ill-matched marriage and the experience of witnessing the pain of a sick child. Only a few years later, she had mostly separated from her previous life and become a freethought writer and lecturer. For the next chapter in her life, Besant worked side by side with English atheist Charles Bradlaugh for the National Secular Society.[8] The two also edited the secularist paper *National Reformer*. Besant's willingness to speak on even the most controversial topics cost her eventually the custody of her children. Besant's husband was able to gain full custody after Bradlaugh and Besant published a controversial birth-control

8 The nineteenth-century history of freethought in Britain was defined by the rivalry of the individualist radical efforts of Charles Bradlaugh and George Jacob Holyoake, whose style was less pugnacious as his mission was to nationalize the secularist movement after Owenism's collapse. Freethinker feminists were found in both camps.

pamphlet in 1877, *The Fruits of Philosophy* by Charles Knowlton, which led to their arrest and trial.

For many, it came as a surprise when, instead of continuing her successful career as a freethought lecturer, Besant moved from her brand of unapologetic atheism to esotericism. Yet for Besant it was not: she saw Theosophy to be completely in accord with her appreciation of scientific inquiry, and in fact, Theosophy could open doors to places where a purely materialist approach to science would fail.

Besant's life embodies the changing landscape of the nineteenth-century transatlantic world; esoteric movements did not only create spaces for women, they changed the religious landscape of the late nineteenth century. In *Infidel Feminism* (2013) Laura Schwartz argues that the rise of interest in esoteric knowledge and the rise of liberal Protestantism that, much like freethinkers, embraced empirical science was one of the reasons why the Golden Age of Freethought eventually dimmed. Freethinkers continued to exist after the turn of the century, but slowly but surely the historical memory of the movement faded.

Conclusion

A minority among a minority, women sceptics in the nineteenth-century United States and Britain were few in number. Even as the transnational freethought movement grew towards the end of the century, the number of women stayed disproportionate to that of men, and by the early twentieth century, the number of women active in the movement was very low. Yet freethinker women did exist, among them fervent atheists, and they united among themselves and across the Atlantic to build their own version of the movement within the movement, carving out little corners of the movement for themselves.

The strength of these women was the ability to see themselves as part of the story of women's freethought – a link in a chain of radical women, helping future women to live free from the small corners they found themselves in. Many drew strength from this shared experience of living as atheist women in a world where being without faith equalled immorality, even celebrating their cultural marginalization. Yet, as the views of the women in this chapter suggest, the chain of radical women was not homogeneous. They had different visions for the future and complex views of femininity and atheism. Some women combined a materialist worldview with spiritualism, maintaining their love for science and belief in reason and

free enquiry. Others distanced themselves from any connection with the spiritual world, focusing their efforts on *terra firma*. On the pages of freethinking publications, women took part in the discussions and considered the merits of each.

Conflicts were a part of these women's lives in other movements as well. Many of these freethinking women were actively involved in the enfranchisement efforts, even initiating them, but were subsequently written to the sidelines or even completely erased from the histories of organized women's rights movements. Despite the activism of atheist women in the abolitionist movement, their names have rarely been acknowledged in the movement's histories, at least in connection with their beliefs. The same fate was met by many women who were mainly active in freethought circles.

Likewise, the lived experiences of sceptic women in the nineteenth century tell a different story. When looking at the history of atheism from the perspective of what it mostly, but not exclusively, was – white and male – historians have failed to recognize the complexity of the movement. Christopher Cameron in *Black Freethinkers* (2019) has demonstrated the ways in which the view changes when one does not accept the idea that blacks were either 'naturally' religious or religious due to their circumstances; the story can be written from the point of view that, quite to the contrary, slavery could and did cultivate the possibility of atheism and critique of religion. Likewise, the lived experiences of sceptic women in the nineteenth century tell a different side of the freethinkers' story. To quote Natalie Zemon Davis and her definition of the margin, for freethinker women their gender combined with atheism created not only a place of struggle, but 'a borderland between cultural deposits that allowed new growth and surprising hybrids' (Zemon Davis 1995, 210).

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31

Early African American Secularism

CHRISTOPHER CAMERON

In Frederick Douglass' second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855, he notes that his religious views during the course of his life "pass[ed] over the whole scale and circle of belief and unbelief, from faith in the overruling Providence of God, to the blackest atheism" (Blassingame et al. 2003). Just three years earlier, in what is perhaps his most well-known speech, Douglass likewise noted that rather than embrace a pro-slavery gospel or a gospel indifferent to the institution of slavery, "I would say welcome infidelity! Welcome atheism! Welcome anything! In preference to the gospel, *as preached by those Divines*!" (Douglass 1852) While his 1852 speech, "What to the slave is the fourth of July," is more well known for its harsh denunciations of American republicanism, his critique of Christian Churches and ministers occupies just as prominent a role and, when combined with insights from his autobiographies and other sources, marks him as one of the earliest black intellectuals to embrace secularism.

For Frederick Douglass and other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black secularists, embracing freethought did not necessarily mean a complete rejection of supernaturalism and traditional religious institutions. Some early black secularists, like Douglass, at times espoused a belief in God, yet their conceptions of the divine were more oftentimes more similar to eighteenth-century deists than they were to contemporary evangelicals. Other black secularists, such as William Wells Brown, appeared indifferent to the idea of a god but never openly participated in the freethought movement. Some, however, did choose to participate in this movement by writing articles for the *Truth Seeker* and other secular publications, attending freethought conventions, and actively working to convince other blacks to abandon Christianity. Early African American secularism, then, was a vibrant and diverse religious and intellectual movement that encompassed many different worldviews. What united these disparate individuals was a commitment

to the primacy of reason over faith, a willingness to question established norms and practices, and a commitment to improving human life in this world rather than achieving salvation in the next.

Origins

While early African American secularism is most pronounced in the works of figures such as Frederick Douglass, its origins actually pre-date Douglass' birth by at least two decades. Black freethought, including atheism, agnosticism, deism, and other non-traditional religious beliefs, arose out of blacks' experiences in slavery. This origin is markedly different from the origin of freethought among whites, who largely came to their religious skepticism as a result of the rise of liberal Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy during the mid- to late eighteenth century. For some African Americans, the beatings, starvation, sexual assault, and general denial of their humanity in the institution of slavery pushed them to question and deny the existence of God. While these same conditions facilitated the growth of black Christianity, some blacks simply could not make the leap of faith and came to believe that a just and benevolent god could not exist, given their earthly conditions.

Much of the evidence for early African American secularism comes from slave narratives. Historians and other scholars have most often used slave narratives to document the religiosity of nineteenth-century African Americans, including the prominence of an "invisible institution," yet these narratives also speak to the presence of non-belief among both northern and southern slaves. The first recorded instance of black freethought comes from the narrative of John Jea, who had been born in Africa in 1773 and sold into slavery in New York two years later. Jea wrote an autobiography in 1811 that detailed his life as a slave and eventual gaining of his freedom. He notes at one point that "from my observations of the conduct and conversation of my master and his sons, I was led to hate those who professed themselves Christians, and to look upon them as devils" (Jea 1811). He states further that "I could not bear to be where the word of God was mentioned, for I had seen so much deception in the people that professed to know God, that I could not endure being where they were, nor yet to hear them call upon the name of the Lord" (Jea 1811). For Jea, the brutality of slavery that he witnessed led him to hate all Christians he encountered and even to eschew the faith altogether. But it was also the hypocrisy of Christians that repelled him from the faith. Upon witnessing Christians who professed the brotherhood of man

lie, cheat, and steal to make their way in life, Jea came to believe the religion was of no use to him, at least while he remained enslaved.

Other slaves proffered similar reasons for rejecting both Christianity and belief in God. Austin Steward was an enslaved man in Prince William County, Virginia during the early nineteenth century. In his 1857 narrative *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman*, Steward makes it very clear that the brutality of the institution had the power to push African Americans toward atheism. In his book, Steward recalls that

> one pleasant Sabbath morning, as I was passing the house where she lived, on my way to the Presbyterian church, where I was sent to ring the bell as usual, I heard the most piteous cries and earnest pleadings issuing from the dwelling. To my horror and the astonishment of those with me, my poor sister made her appearance, weeping bitterly, and followed by her inhuman master, who was polluting the air of that clear Sabbath morning, with the most horrid imprecations and threatenings, and at the same time flourishing a large raw-hide. (Steward 1857)

His master soon began to beat his sister over the head, shoulders, and back "until she was literally cut to pieces" (Steward 1857). Steward very purposefully noted that this incident occurred on a Sunday morning, likely to highlight both the hypocrisy of his master and the hypocrisy of the existence of slavery in a nominally Christian country. After this beating, Steward's master dutifully attended church, pushing Steward to ask "can any one wonder that I, and other slaves, often doubted the sincerity of every white man's religion? Can it be a matter of astonishment, that slaves often feel there is no just God for the poor African?" (Steward 1857).

The inability to resolve the problem of evil, or the question of how an omnipotent and omniscient deity can permit such widespread suffering in the world, provided the foundation for other slaves' rejection of belief in God. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* sheds light on why some slaves may have embraced atheism. At one point in the narrative, Jacobs recalls going with her grandmother to visit her uncle Benjamin, who had tried to escape from slavery and was languishing in a jail cell. Jacobs posits that her grandmother and uncle were trying to console each other. Benjamin claimed that when he was captured and briefly got away, he considered throwing himself into the river and ending his life when he thought of what it might do to his mother. Jacobs' grandmother "asked if he did not also think of God?" (Jacobs 1861). Harriet notes "I saw his face grow fierce in the moonlight. He answered, 'No, I did not think of him. When a man is hunted like

a wild beast he forgets there is a God, a heaven. He forgets every thing in his struggle to get beyond the reach of the bloodhounds'" (Jacobs 1861). It may of course be the case that Benjamin later accepted Christianity or another religious system, yet his words are nevertheless instructive as to the mind-set of slave runaways and their relationship to God in that moment. It likewise speaks to the ways that conditions of slavery in general could foster non-belief.

A key aspect of early African American secularism among slaves was a mocking or otherwise lack of regard for the holiness and sacrality of the Sabbath. In his 1837 narrative *Slavery in the United States*, Charles Ball, an enslaved man in Maryland during the early nineteenth century, claimed "there is, in general, very little sense of religious obligation, or duty, amongst the slaves on the cotton plantations. And Christianity cannot be, with propriety, called the religion of these people . . . They have not the slightest regard for the Sabbath-day, and their masters make no efforts to impress them with the least respect for this sacred institution" (Ball 1837). Another enslaved man, Henry Bibb, likewise speaks to Ball's point, noting "the Sabbath is not regarded by a large number of the slaves as a day of rest" (Bibb 1849). This was largely because slaves did not have access to Sunday school or to church services in many locales, and thus found other amusements to keep them busy. "Those who make no profession of religion," Bibb states, "resort to the woods in large numbers on that day to gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the Sabbath" (Bibb 1849). Here, Bibb both recognizes the presence of a significant number of slaves who adhere to no religious beliefs and those who see the Sabbath as merely a day of rest from work rather than a holy day.

Both Peter Randolph and William Wells Brown demonstrate how masters' neglect of slaves' religious life or overenthusiasm for slaves' conversion could cause a general indifference or hostility to Christianity. In his 1855 narrative *Sketches of Slave Life*, Peter Randolph points out that in some locales, masters were actively opposed to their slaves engaging in religious behaviors and rituals such as praying and would rather have slaves dance than practice religion. "Sometimes, when a slave, on being whipped, calls upon God," Randolph claims, "he is forbidden to do so, under threat of having his throat cut, or brains blown out" (Randolph 1855). This situation pushes many slaves to scoff at religion and spend their Sabbath playing marbles or other games to gamble for food. For William Wells Brown, it was not neglect of slaves' religion that pushed him away from Christianity, but rather an overzealous master who went out of his

way to try to convert his slaves to Christianity, likely making up for an earlier period of neglect. Brown states that slaves on his master's plantation near St. Louis were allowed to spend their Sundays as they liked, hunting, fishing, or just resting. After his master's conversion, however, slaves were forced to attend weekend services and even some services during the week. During these services, which were held in his master's home, Brown notes that the only thing that allowed him to get through it was the presence of a large pitcher of mint julep:

> "I cannot say but I loved the julep as well as any of them," Brown writes, "and during prayer was always careful to seat myself close to the table where it stood, so as to help myself when they were all busily engaged in their devotions. By the time prayer was over, I was about as happy as any of them." (Brown 1847)

Brown's admission here is an important one. At the time he wrote this narrative, in 1847, the abolitionist movement was in full swing. Most slaves who remarked on atheism in slave communities pointed the finger elsewhere, arguing that conditions of slavery fostered secularism among others, but not necessarily themselves. William Wells Brown, however, was one of few enslaved people who spoke to his own lack of religious beliefs, and he did so without hesitation.

In addition to his slave narrative, William Wells Brown used his fictional work to shed light on the negative uses to which Christianity was put in the antebellum south. His 1853 novel, *Clotel or, The President's Daughter*, was the first novel published by an African American and begins with extensive critiques of both slavery and Christianity. Clotel is the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, and the novel opens with her being sold at auction for $1500, during which the slave trader turned her Christian faith into a selling point. This auction spoke to the hypocrisy of American Christians, especially since it took place "in a city thronged with churches, whose tall spires look like so many signals pointing to heaven, and whose ministers preach that slavery is a God-ordained institution" (Brown 1853). Brown here implies that religious institutions and belief are ineffective means of promoting a just and inclusive society. His poem at the end of the novel's first chapter reinforces this point and demonstrates why he believes some black people reject belief in God: "O God! my every heart-string cries, /Dost thou these scenes behold /In this our boasted Christian land, / And must the truth be told? / Blush, Christian! For e'en the dark, / Untutored heathen see /Thy inconsistency; and, lo! / They scorn thy God, and thee!" (Brown 1853).

Throughout the book, Brown directly and indirectly attacks Christianity, especially with the way he portrays religious and non-religious characters. The Reverend John Peck, for example, purchased Clotel's mother, Currer, at an auction but refused to purchase Clotel's sister, Althesa, thereby separating the family. In a conversation with his friend Carlton, Rev. Peck asks whether or not it is "better that Christian men should hold slaves than unbelievers? We know how to value the bread of life, and will not keep it from our slaves" (Brown 1853). While this may have seemed like a legitimate argument to pro-slavery apologists, Brown holds it up as an example of the highest level of Christian hypocrisy. For his part, Peck's friend Carlton disagrees and notes that blacks and whites should be equal. Interestingly enough, Carlton is a non-believer, demonstrating that for Brown, infidels possessed a greater moral compass when it came to slavery than did Christians.

While William Wells Brown was personally a religious skeptic, he never played the same role in the freethought movement that his contemporary, Frederick Douglass, did. For Douglass, this role was sometimes indirect, with other white freethinkers using him as an example of what was possible for African American secularism. At other times, however, Douglass' role was more direct and reflects his lifelong commitment to the primacy of reason over faith and the critical importance of working to achieve freedom and equality in this world rather than salvation in the next. Frederick Douglass' critiques of American Christianity began with the publication of his first autobiography in 1845, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. When Douglass was fifteen years old, he was sent to live with a "slave breaker" named Edward Covey, whom he compared to Jesus and Satan. Douglass wrote that Covey "had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us. This he did by surprising us. He seldom approached the spot where we were at work openly, if he could do it secretly. He always aimed at taking us by surprise. Such was his cunning, that we used to call him, among ourselves, 'the snake'" (Douglass 1845). Douglass' reference to "the snake" was a clear comparison to Satan, yet soon after that he noted that Covey's movements "were like a thief in the night," which also conflated him with Jesus, whose Second Coming was also supposed to be like a thief in the night (Douglass 1845). And this prospect was not a hopeful one for Douglass. If Covey is like Jesus, then, Douglass implies, slaves cannot rely on God's justice and mercy and would do better relying on human effort to attain their freedom.

In addition to his implication that Jesus could not help slaves gain their freedom, Douglass also proffered some of the harshest critiques of American

Christianity from an enslaved or free black man in the nineteenth century. Early in the *Narrative*, Douglass noted that while many may think religion is a softening influence on slave masters, the opposite was actually true. His master was converted at a camp meeting in 1832 and Douglass hoped this would make him either emancipate his slaves or treat them more humanely. "I was disappointed in both these respects," he posits. "If it has any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before" (Douglass 1845). While his remarks here may not seem particularly harsh, they in fact represent a strong denunciation of Christianity and the power of God to change the heart of human beings. The religion is supposed to foster meekness, humility, and loving kindness, he implies, yet in the case of both his master and others throughout the American south, the opposite was true, which might demonstrate God's powerlessness in changing human behavior.

Post-Civil War Black Freethought

Frederick Douglass did not reserve his animus for white American churches; in the post-Civil War era, he also proffered harsh denunciations of black Christianity and black Christian ministers. He deplored black ministers' lack of education and suggested that African Americans would be better served by progressive, educated white ministers such as Theodore Parker, whom he greatly admired. Douglass likewise felt the emotionalism so widespread in black churches was counter-productive and portrayed the race in a negative light. But his main issue was the perceived otherworldliness of black churches. Despite the long history of congregations like Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia being politically active, helping fugitive slaves, etc., Douglass nevertheless felt that black churches focused too much on personal salvation rather than justice in this world. Indeed, he ran afoul of black ministers in 1870 when he noted at the final meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society that while most people were thanking God for emancipation, "I like to thank men . . . I want to express my love to God and gratitude to God, by thanking those faithful men and women, who have devoted the great energies of their soul to the welfare of mankind. It is only through such men and such women that I can get a glimpse of God anywhere" (Pinn 2001). While Douglass here acknowledges the existence of God, he nevertheless claims that human beings hold the real power to effect change in this world. For their part, black religious leaders were incensed and stated that they would not acknowledge Douglass as a leader if he could not

give God the credit for emancipation. They were likewise put off by his opposition to the use of Bibles in public schools. Douglass replied to the ministers' statement: "I bow to no priests either of faith or of unfaith. I claim as against all sorts of people, simply perfect freedom of thought" (Pinn 2001).

Shortly after this episode, Douglass published an article that contained at times scathing views of the Black Church and its leaders. AME Bishop Campbell and others had in effect put him on trial for heresy and other dangerous ideas, a fact that he ridiculed, since all it could do in the nineteenth century was harm someone's reputation. He claimed that "the condemnations, maledictions, and denunciations of the Church, whether Bethel or St. Peter's, to the outside world, have no more significance than the vulgar curses of the crowd" (Douglass 1870). He did not believe the church had any special claim to morality, especially because its main purpose seemed to be fostering personal salvation for the next world. He ended the article by positing that charges of heresy by black ministers "have no claim to any respect or deference from me or anybody else. Besides destitution of jurisdiction, they are worthless" (Douglass 1870). Here, in no uncertain terms, Douglass distanced himself from the black Church, its leaders, and its main goals.

Rather than embracing the theology and practices of the black Church, Douglass chose to associate himself with the freethought movement. On Thanksgiving Day in 1870, he gave a speech in which he noted that he was "glad to observe that the old superstitions respecting 'chance,' 'luck,' and 'Providence' were giving way to a more rational and scientific explanation of human success and failure" (The Iconoclast, 1870). Four years later, in 1874, he received an invitation to speak at the annual meeting of the Free Religious Association (FRA), an organization founded by Unitarian ministers open to people of all faiths or none. The FRA aimed to foster a "religion of humanity" similar to the principles Douglass espoused, along with advocating for the separation of church and state. Douglass was unable to speak at the conference, yet his letter declining the invitation indicates he agreed with the organization's goals. He stated:

> Freedom is a word of charming sound not only to the tasked and tortured slaves who toil for an earthly master, but for those who would break the galling chains of darkness and superstition. Regarding the Free Religious movement as one for light, love, and liberty, limited only by reason and human welfare, and opposed to the works of those who convert life and death into enemies of human happiness who people the invisible world with ghastly taskmasters I give it hearty welcome. (Holland 1969)

In 1889, he accepted an honorary position as vice president of the FRA, which, along with his other writings and activism, mark him as the leading black freethinker of the nineteenth century.

While Frederick Douglass was the leading black freethinker in the 1800s, he was not the only one active in the movement. David S. Cincore, an ex-slave and ex-preacher living in Philadelphia in the mid-1880s, would be dubbed the "colored Bob Ingersoll" (Robert Ingersoll) for his work trying to convert African Americans to atheism. Robert Ingersoll was widely regarded as the leading American freethought orator in the late nineteenth century, so this comparison was high praise indeed. Cincore attended national freethought conferences and was a speaker at one, where he indicated he wanted to become a freethought lecturer so he could "work among my people in the South" (Schmidt 2016). Cincore was clearly familiar with Ingersoll's work, commenting that "one of Colonel Ingersoll's pamphlets is more to me than all the Bibles in the world" (Schmidt 2016). Additionally, Cincore stated that a single line from eighteenth-century freethinker Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* "is more than the Ten Commandments" (Schmidt 2016). He was an ex-slave, but, he argued, "I did not get my freedom from the church. The great truth that all men are by nature free was never told on Sinai's barren crags, nor by the lonely shores of Galilee" (Schmidt 2016). In a similar vein to Frederick Douglass, Cincore notes that God did not play any role in his emancipation. And like Douglass, Cincore came under attack by the black Church, with an article in the AME Church's organ, the *Christian Recorder*, referring to him as "infidel slime" after a speech he gave to a literary society in Philadelphia.

In the early twentieth century, other blacks emerged as leading voices in African American secularism. Lord A. Nelson of San Francisco, for example, welcomed white freethinker Samuel Putnam on a trip to California and wrote a letter expressing support for his new journal, *Freethought*. "I am strictly secular; an Atheist of the olden type," he wrote in 1888. "The woods is full of us" (Nelson 1888). Along with Nelson, R. S. King was another black freethinker who wrote articles for the leading freethought publication of the day, the *Truth Seeker*. In one such article in 1904, King claimed "there are few, if any, scoundrels in the world who do not believe in the existence of God" (King 1904). Here, he speaks to Douglass' point from 1845 that Christians hold no monopoly on morality and he implies that, contrary to popular opinion, freethinkers hold an advantage over Christians on questions of ethics. When referencing God's existence, King claimed that "no evidence, even to the extent of probability, supports such a contention. The idea of God

is born of hope and desire, but neither of these promoters of 'ignorant assurance' furnishes anything in the nature of proof" (King 1904). For King, faith was useless and he could only be convinced to believe in God with logical proof of His existence. Although his claim that he was "the only Negro freethought author in the United States" was not an accurate one, he was one of few who were active in the movement and willing to put his words in print.

Caribbean Migration and Black Secularism

One of the most significant developments in early African American secularism was increased migration of blacks from the Caribbean to the United States during the early twentieth century. In 1899, there were just a few hundred migrants from the region, but this number increased to 12,000 annually by 1924; by 1930, black Caribbean migrants made up 25 percent of Harlem's population. Between 1901 and 1924, a total of 102,000 migrants from the Caribbean entered the United States. Many came to escape colonial wars. Others came because local Caribbean economies were in bad shape due to the low price of sugar. And still others came for the cultural and political opportunities they believed Harlem offered, especially after the New Negro Renaissance kicked off in the late 1910s. This development was significant for two primary reasons. First, Caribbean migrants were generally less religious than their black American counterparts. Many had been forced to attend church in their home countries and were happy they did not have to do so in America. Others had been introduced to the freethought movement at home and would bring their secular perspectives to the United States. Second, many of these migrants were politically radical due to extensive travel, prior political organizing, and educational opportunities that were not available to most African Americans. This proclivity toward political radicalism would go hand in hand with religious radicalism and invigorate black secularism during the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Hubert Harrison quickly emerged as one of the leading black secular thinkers in this era. Born in St. Croix in 1883, Harrison moved to Harlem in 1900 and, within a year of his arrival, he had abandoned Christianity and belief in God. For Harrison, this process was a gradual one that began with his reading of American and European secular thinkers, including Thomas Paine, Voltaire, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. But his "conversion" to secularism would not be an easy one. He claimed that he was "not one of those who did not care: I suffered. Oh, how my poor wounded soul cried out in agony!"

(Perry 2001). But despite this suffering, Harrison continued down the path of non-belief, although in his telling, secularism actually represented a belief. "I now had a new belief – Agnosticism," he states. "I said belief: what I did mean was philosophy-of-life, point-of-observation, attitude-toward-things" (Perry 2001). While many characterize atheists and agnostics as those who believe in nothing, for Harrison and other black freethinkers, embracing secularism meant embracing a worldview that emphasized reason, the scientific method, compassion for other human beings, and a commitment to political activism aimed at improving this world.

One of Hubert Harrison's main goals was to spread freethought among other African Americans and Afro-Caribbean migrants to the United States. In one sense, Harrison saw himself as an intellectual descendant of Thomas Paine. He greatly admired Paine's works and approach, especially the way that Paine's *Age of Reason* "popularized the arguments against Christianity and brought them down to the level of the democracy" (Perry 2001). He believed he could do the same thing for African Americans in the twentieth century that Paine had done for white Americans in the early nineteenth century. "It should seem that Negroes, of all Americans, would be found in the freethought fold," he noted, "since they have suffered more than any other class of Americans from the dubious blessings of Christianity" (Perry 2001). The dubious blessings to which he referred include the prevalence of pro-slavery religion in the nineteenth century that justified the enslavement of African Americans, as well as biblical arguments for segregation in the twentieth century. Like William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, and other early black freethinkers, Harrison viewed American Christianity as an oppressive institution that worked tirelessly to keep blacks in a subordinate position in the nation. In order to rectify their political disenfranchisement, African Americans should throw off the religion that supported the status quo.

Harrison employed many different techniques to achieve his aims. He participated in freethought events such as a Thomas Paine commemoration dinner, where he gave a speech on Paine that was later published in the *Truth Seeker*. He was also an organizer for the Socialist Party, with the specific goal of recruiting more African Americans. He began this latter position in 1911, arguing that socialists were better on racial issues than members of the two major parties. For Harrison, this was related to his goal of spreading freethought because most socialist leaders, as well as the rank and file members, were non-believers. Harrison's primary freethought activity, like the "Great Agnostic" Robert Ingersoll, was lecturing. Unlike Ingersoll, Harrison did not travel around the country giving talks, but rather lectured on soapboxes and

stepladders throughout New York City. His lectures covered a wide range of topics, including freethought, radical politics, and African American history. And they would impact the religious and political ideology of future black freethinkers. One of these, Richard B. Moore, heard Harrison speak in Madison Square Park and stated that "his ability to make complex subjects clear and simple, and the power of his logic and presentation gained him a hearing in some very difficult situations" (Logan and Winston 1982). The Jamaican poet Claude McKay wrote that Harrison "lectured on free-thought, socialism, and racialism, and sold books. He spoke precisely and clearly, with fine intelligence and masses of facts" (McKay 1937). Others compared Harrison's level of intellectualism to Socrates. William Pickens of the NAACP, for example, claimed that even Socrates could not have outdone Harrison in making ordinary topics seem interesting. Harrison's lectures clearly had a significant impact and earned him the nickname "father of Harlem radicalism."

Another Caribbean migrant to the United States during this era was Claude McKay, who went on to become one of the foremost poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Unlike Harrison, McKay became a freethinker prior to his arrival in the United States. McKay was born in Clarenden, Jamaica in 1889. Until he was seven years old, Claude grew up in an intensely religious household. His father was a deacon in a local Baptist church, a position that carried great respect, along with the expectation that he would raise his kids with the same religious values he held. In this respect, Claude's father, Thomas, fell short, as both Claude and his older brother U. Theo were freethinkers. Claude went to live with U. Theo in Montego Bay when he was seven, and would stay with him for the next seven years. U. Theo was an agnostic and a socialist, and both of these elements would rub off on young Claude during his time in Montego Bay. U. Theo expressed his religious perspective succinctly in a later letter to Claude: "I believe in independence, especially intellectual independence, which prevents one from accepting theories however respectable traditions may make them. I still stand a free man, where revealed religion is concerned. Try as I may I cannot but regard the teachings of priest and prophet as anything but superstition" (James 2000). In short order, Claude began reading works of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, William Berkeley, and Herbert Spencer, all of which pushed him toward accepting agnosticism.

The social ostracism that Claude McKay experienced in Jamaica because of his secularism is representative of the experiences of African American freethinkers more broadly. At age fourteen, Claude moved to Sunny Ville

with his parents, as did his brother U. Theo. U. Theo, despite his agnosticism, accepted a teaching job at a local Catholic school, which angered their father, as Thomas believed Claude would become a Catholic. He was likely even more incensed to find out that Claude believed in no religions at all. Additionally, shortly after his arrival there was a large revival where both Claude and U. Theo were pressured to convert to Christianity, which both refused to do. Claude notes that in the wake of his refusal "the villagers now looked at me strangely as one who was among them but not really of them, chiefly because I did not believe in their gods" (McKay 1979). Not only did he refuse to convert himself, but, like Hubert Harrison, Claude began to work among his friends and tried to convince them to leave behind Christianity as well. McKay would immigrate to the United States in 1912, where he became active in both socialist and communist circles, working, for example, as the co-editor of the monthly socialist magazine *The Liberator*. It was here in the July 1919 issue that he published his most well-known poem "If we must die."

Conclusion

As Claude McKay's experience suggests, there were close ties between early African American secularism and the literary and artistic movement known as the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance. The New Negro Renaissance emerged from a confluence of factors, including the migration of roughly 500,000 black southerners to the urban north between 1916 and 1919 and the prevalence of racial violence throughout the country after the end of World War I, culminating in the Red Scare of 1919, which saw race riots in twenty-six cities that resulted in the lynching of seventy-six blacks. The New Negro Renaissance began around 1917 and would last into the 1930s. Once it began, the movement provided fertile ground for the spread of black freethought. Harlem was among the most popular destinations for migrants, including artists and intellectuals, many of whom had developed their religious skepticism while living in the South but now had an opportunity to discuss and debate ideas with like-minded skeptics.

Among the more prominent black artists of the New Negro Renaissance who were also religious skeptics were Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Hughes came to disbelieve in God while still a teenager after a negative experience on the "mourner's bench." He moved to Harlem in 1921 and quickly began publishing poems that were intensely critical of Christianity and the power of God to help black people. These poems included "Song for a dark girl," published in *Crisis* magazine in 1922, and

"Who but the Lord?" In both of these pieces, Hughes argues that belief in God has not helped black people escape lynching and police brutality, and he implies that blacks would do better relying on their own strength than looking to God for support. Zora Neale Hurston likewise moved to Harlem in the early 1920s from the rural South. She grew up in Eatonville, Florida, an all-black town, where her father had been a preacher. She notes in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* that she began to question religion at a very young age, and these questions persisted into adulthood. Eventually she expressed a position that was a mix between deism and agnosticism, namely that she doesn't know if there is a god, but if there is, that god is not concerned with the fate of human beings and it would be useless trying to pray to him.

Early African American secularism was widespread among leading political, intellectual, and artistic figures within black culture. While the overwhelming majority of African Americans adhered to some form of religion, whether African traditions, evangelical Christianity, or other monotheistic sects, a small but significant group of blacks embraced the principles of freethought. This group included figures discussed throughout this chapter, as well as individuals such as Alain Locke, Nella Larsen, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, Louise Thompson Patterson, and W. E. B. Du Bois. These were individuals whose artwork, writing, and political activism profoundly influenced black life, at the same time that their own worldviews were shaped by their rejection of religion. This fact suggests that while black freethinkers have always constituted a small segment of African American culture, they have nevertheless played an outsized role in shaping the course of African American and African diasporic history.

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PART VI

TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES: INTELLECTUAL AND ARTISTIC CURRENTS

32

Analytic Philosophy

SARA RACHEL CHANT

According to a 2014 survey, 72.2 percent of all philosophy professors in the United States are atheists (Bourget and Chalmers 2014). This is a striking figure, especially considering that the United States overall is far more religious than other western nations. According to the Pew Research Center, only about 3.1 percent of Americans are atheists (Pew Research Center 2015). Furthermore, the high percentage of atheists among American philosophy professors is not found among American academics as a whole. Even in that group, the proportion of atheistic philosophy professors is still more than twice as high (Gross 2007). Notwithstanding some prominent Christian philosophers, American philosophers are a very atheistic group indeed.

This disparity between philosophers and other populations raises an interesting question: Is there something about American philosophy that provides an especially fertile ground for atheism? To begin answering this question, there is no better person to look toward than Bertrand Russell, who was both one of the founders of analytic philosophy (which is the dominant philosophical tradition in the United States) and an outspoken atheist.

Russell on Religious Belief

Russell splits the arguments in favor of religious belief into two categories. In the first we have arguments that you *ought* to believe in God, and in the other, arguments that God *exists*. They are not the same, for there can be compelling reasons to believe in the existence of something, even if those reasons have no bearing on whether the thing actually exists. For example, if I inform you that I am going to kill you unless you can truthfully claim to believe in Zeus, then I've provided you with an excellent reason to believe in the

existence of Zeus. But I think we can agree that my threat has no bearing on whether Zeus actually *exists*.

The example might seem too absurd to consider, but it is very much like some highly influential arguments for belief in God. William James famously argued that we ought to believe in God because if we don't, we will tend to behave immorally. Let us grant that the premise is true, and that all atheism causes people to be morally reprehensible (which, for the record, seems highly implausible). Like my threat to kill you unless you believe in Zeus, the fact that atheism makes people immoral provides no actual evidence that God exists. It only means that the world would be a better place if nobody were an atheist. It could be the case that God does not exist, and that if everyone knew this, the world would be a horrible place. That would be terrible luck for humanity, but it could be the case nonetheless.

Russell's response to this style of argument is curious. On the one hand, he is highly dismissive of it, spending only a sentence or two dispatching it. Such an argument, according to Russell, is like the political argument that we ought to teach children that their particular nation's flag deserves respect. Even if such a belief, inculcated into children at a very young age, leads to a healthier society (another assumption that seems highly implausible), it does nothing to establish that the flag actually deserves respect. Such arguments for the moral advantages of belief in God, the importance of respecting a flag, or the belief in Father Christmas are all on the same level. For Russell, the same response applies to any argument purporting to establish that belief in God leads to either a happier life, a well-ordered society, a population with superior morals, well-behaved children, or a stronger nation. It is not that such arguments are wrong, but that they are *non sequiturs*. The effects of the belief are totally irrelevant to the question of whether we ought to hold them. For Russell, we want to know whether the belief is true, not whether it happens to be beneficial. That is the only relevant issue when it comes to belief.

On the other hand, despite his quick dismissal of William James' argument, Russell devotes a surprisingly large amount of effort to the task of invalidating the premises. This is puzzling; for if you thought that the premises were simply irrelevant, why devote any effort to evaluating them? But Russell does exactly this. He enumerates examples of highly devout, but unethical people, with special attention given to government officials and religious figures. Russell even goes so far as to call into question Jesus Christ's own moral character, citing plenty of examples of His enthusiastically endorsing the terrible suffering and punishment of vast numbers of innocent people who

were guilty of nothing more than being unaware of His existence. But despite Russell's clear love of being a provocateur, the question remains: Why bother with this line of argument at all? We'll return to this question a little later.

But for now, let's focus on disambiguating the question of whether one ought to believe in God. As we've seen, this is in fact two questions. The first is, "are you better off believing in God?"; the second is, "is there good evidence that God exists?" Let's call the first question "pragmatic," and the second "evidential." For James, the pragmatic question is paramount; for Russell, it's the evidential question that takes center stage. Of course, these criteria are not mutually exclusive. It could be the case that you have excellent reasons for believing that God exists *and* that such a belief will be a very good thing to possess. Or, like Russell, you could believe that there is no such compelling evidence (and indeed, that there is strong evidence to the contrary) *and* that such a belief wouldn't be at all useful anyway.

Thinking about the issue as two separate questions is illuminating because it shows us that the debate comes down to the difficult question of why you ought to hold any particular belief in the first place. For Russell, you ought to do your very best to believe only things that are true. For James, there can be more pragmatic reasons for belief. So let's put aside God for the moment, and consider the meta-question of why you ought to believe anything.

Russell clearly holds what we might call an "evidential" view of belief, namely that we ought to follow the evidence to the best of our ability so that we hold beliefs that are accurate, and that is the end of the story. If a true statement happens to be inconvenient, emotionally distressing, or otherwise makes your life worse, that's just bad luck. You do not have permission to simply opt out of believing it.

According to the "pragmatic" view of belief, the act of forming a belief is just like any other action. We perform actions for a variety of perfectly acceptable, pragmatic reasons. I drive my car to work instead of riding a donkey because riding a donkey is impractical; I walk my dogs because it's pleasant for me to walk them; and I believe in God because my religious beliefs make my life go better. Belief formation is like car-driving and dog-walking insofar as we do it because it helps us to get on with living a good life.

The Value of Belief

Belief formation, therefore, is seen to be very different from most other actions we perform, at least on Russell's view. Although pragmatic

considerations are perfectly acceptable motivations for the vast majority of other actions, they are supposedly irrelevant to belief formation.

We are now in a position to note some important features of this debate. The question of belief in God comes down to a question about why we ought to believe anything. But this is a question of values: Is the proper criterion for belief pragmatic (as with James) or evidential (as with Russell)? This formulation starts to resemble questions of morality, and for good reason. For in such questions, we see a similar division.

Consider the question of whether I should tell my spouse a painful truth, or lie (no third option being available). On the one hand, I could argue that I ought to spare him the suffering that would be caused by knowing the truth. On the other hand, there is the argument that it is immoral to deceive him, and that I ought to be honest regardless of the consequences. A highly pragmatic person might argue along utilitarian lines. Such a person could say, "If doing one thing causes pain and doing another thing avoids that pain, then you should do the latter." But a more hard-nosed and moralistic person might say, "You have an obligation to be truthful to your spouse, and the consequences of telling the truth do not enter into it. You should tell the truth."

Moral issues, according to the latter perspective, simply cannot be settled by pragmatic considerations. Pragmatic arguments are *non sequiturs*. According to the former perspective, there is nothing distinctive about moral questions. I ought to tell the truth only if doing so brings about the best outcomes. In this way, the question of whether or not I ought to tell my spouse the truth is like the question of whether I ought to drive my car or ride a donkey to work. I'll make the choice along pragmatic lines.

We thus see that belief formation has an interesting similarity to moral action. In each case, there are two views about their proper value. You can either hold the pragmatic view that forming beliefs and behaving morally come down to their consequences. Or you can hold the hardline view that the consequences are irrelevant – you ought to form a belief if the belief is accurate, and you ought to perform an action if it is moral, regardless of the outcomes.

Strange Bedfellows

Now we are in a position to appreciate a curious tension in Russell's worldview. Russell is famous for his scathing attacks on the church, religious belief, and traditional morality in general. Belief formation is very special,

according to Russell, because it is not to be guided at all by pragmatic considerations. In this way, belief formation for Russell is like moral action for the most dogmatic moralist.

Thus, the debate between Russell and James seems to come down to an "ought" question. If you think that beliefs ought to follow the evidence, come what may, then you'll be amenable to Russell. But if you think that beliefs ought to be formed for reasons other than strictly evidential ones, you'll probably be sympathetic to James. And like every other "ought" question, there is no objective set of agreed-upon empirical facts that will settle the issue. Just as two people can agree about every empirical fact and yet differ on moral questions, they could just as easily differ on the question of the value of belief. Observable evidence will simply not settle such issues. Thus, it also will not settle the issue of whether one ought to follow James or Russell with respect to one's belief in God.

Earlier, I noted that Russell spends a surprising amount of time arguing against the premise that belief in God is favorable to morality, noting that it's odd he would do so given that Russell also argues that the question is irrelevant. After all, why waste time arguing a point when you've just noted that the question is irrelevant in the first place? I think we are now in a position to see why.

If the debate about belief in God comes down to the question of why beliefs are valuable, then there are no further facts that Russell can summon in support of his position. The debate is simply at an impasse. But Russell clearly does not want to leave the debate in such an undesirable state – he wants people to be atheists. Thus, in order to continue the debate, Russell has to grant his opponents' meta-belief about the value of belief, and engage on their terms.

We've already seen the first way that Russell addresses the issue from this direction, namely by arguing that religious believers are no more likely to be moral people than are atheists. Even though he does not come out and say it explicitly, the argument is this: Even if we grant that you should form beliefs that encourage moral behavior, religious belief doesn't do that. The evidence is a litany of highly immoral people who sincerely, devoutly believe in God; if religion makes you so wonderfully moral, why are these people such scoundrels? But this will seem to many like a cheap shot – surely it is easy to find immoral people in any community. And given the billions upon billions of believers in the world, surely anyone could come up with a list of a half-dozen or so who are truly awful. With all due respect to Russell, his strategy of naming immoral people who

believe in God is a straw man argument. After all, nobody is claiming that belief in God is an absolute guarantee of morality; they are only claiming that it is *favorable* to morality. Surely, both sides will grant that there are morally upstanding atheists and morally reprehensible theists. This banal observation settles nothing.

A more interesting strategy for engaging with the religious believer is to suggest that they don't really hold such a pragmatic view about belief, even if they claim to. In fact, according to Russell, everyone agrees about the value of belief, even if they don't realize it. The debate is not at an impasse after all, because everyone already agrees that we ought to hold a belief only if there is strong evidence for its truth. And since there is no such evidence for the existence of God, we ought not to believe in God.

As you can imagine, it would not be easy to demonstrate that theists are actually on the same page as regards the nature and value of belief. Many (including William James) deny that they are, and it would take a lot of psychological digging to establish that they're wrong about their own beliefs (although it's certainly possible). I don't know what such a demonstration would look like, and to my knowledge, Russell himself never offers any proof. He merely claims that a believer in God "will not be content with the view that the belief in God is useful, because he will wish to know whether, in fact, there is a God."

But let's go further than Russell does, and unpack this claim a little bit more to help us decide whether it seems plausible. Consider the following thought experiment. Imagine we have found definitive, unassailable, incontrovertible proof that God does *not* exist. This proof is easily understandable, available to everyone, and so compelling that nobody would ever doubt it. Would someone who had formerly believed in God still believe in God even after being confronted with this proof?

If belief in God is justified by its favorable effects on one's moral character, then a proof of God's non-existence ought to be judged irrelevant to the question of whether one ought to believe in God. William James ought not be troubled by this proof one bit, because according to him, belief in God was never about evidence in the first place.

Of course, Russell implies that a religious believer would, as a matter of fact, be highly troubled. It is not satisfying to believe in God only for pragmatic reasons; we would all want to know if the belief is *true*. If we were to know for a fact that the belief is not true, then nobody would believe it. If so, then nobody is really so pragmatic about beliefs after all. Deep down, we want to follow the evidence wherever it may lead.

I don't know if Russell is right about this. I suspect that the "easy way out" is correct in this case, specifically, that with billions of believers in the world, some would continue to believe in the face of such a proof and others would not. But I will note that there is a certain level of plausibility to Russell's speculation, based on my experience in the classroom. I've often observed that the students who profess to believe in God on the basis of faith alone are almost always quite concerned with evidential arguments for or against the existence of God. In fact, my experience is that the louder a student is about the necessity of believing in God on the basis of faith alone, the more adamant they are about rational justifications for such belief. But, of course, this is just one person's experience.

Is the Question Moot Anyway?

At this point we should consider a nagging feeling that the question of the proper role of belief is simply moot. Unlike the abstract, philosophical questions we've been considering, this one is completely empirical. We've been speculating about whether we ought to believe on the basis of evidence alone or whether we should believe for pragmatic reasons. But this question assumes a certain type of "doxastic voluntarism." Doxastic voluntarism is the view that we have voluntary control over our beliefs – that is, that we can voluntarily choose what to believe. If doxastic voluntarism is not true, then we can't decide to believe in God (or anything else for that matter) for pragmatic reasons.

This issue often arises when we consider Pascal's Wager, which is the most famous non-evidential argument for belief in God. The argument is simple. It says that no matter whether God exists or not, your best bet is to believe in God. For if God exists, believing is better than not believing because God will reward believers with everlasting life and eternal happiness and punish non-believers with never-ending torment (putting aside the question of whether a Christian God would actually have such a draconian policy). And if God does not exist, the only difference between belief and non-belief is that the believer might have wasted some time. So, on balance, your best bet is to believe in God.

Like all simple philosophical arguments, Pascal's Wager is not simple at all when you start thinking about it. One immediate issue with the argument is that it doesn't even try to provide evidence that God exists. Instead, it assumes that you have the ability to form your beliefs on the basis of a cost–benefit analysis. But it is not at all clear that this is so.

Recall our earlier example in which I threaten to kill you unless you can truthfully say that you believe Zeus exists. It seems to me that you're in a bad spot. You might wish that you believed in Zeus; you might try to trick me into thinking that you believe in Zeus; and you might even try to grit your teeth and concentrate as hard as you can on the idea that Zeus exists. But I doubt very much that you could *actually* form this belief, no matter how urgent the need. In fact, I don't even know what it would be like to make such an effort – does it involve squinting really hard and furrowing one's brows until beads of sweat form on your forehead?

It may be more plausible to suppose that there are indirect methods of forming specific beliefs. Perhaps it is human nature to adopt the beliefs of one's community, and so I could form some religious beliefs by living among people who hold such beliefs. Or maybe it's the case that simply by going through the motions of certain rituals and practices for long enough, I'll gradually form the beliefs that go along with those habits. For example, maybe if I go to church every Sunday, read the Bible every day, celebrate Christian holidays, and so on for several years, I'll discover that I have transitioned from being an atheist to being a sincere Christian believer. I'm not sure if this would work, but perhaps it's plausible enough that we can't dismiss this debate out of hand.

Analytic Philosophy

Now it is time to return to our original question, which is "why does analytic philosophy have such an unusually large number of atheists?"

It would be tempting to say that we're already done. After all, Russell was one of the founders of analytic philosophy, and he was an atheist. So it shouldn't be surprising that the field he founded happens to have a lot of atheists. However, such an easy answer is not nearly good enough. Analytic philosophers no doubt owe an intellectual debt to Russell. However, philosophy professors are not slavish devotees of Russell or anyone else.

Another factor that makes the question difficult is that analytic philosophy, like other intellectual fields, has changed a lot during its history. To be a philosopher in Russell's sense of "philosophy" required a deep focus on issues relating to mathematical logic. Although this is still a part of analytic philosophy, it has largely been supplanted by other sets of philosophical problems and methodologies. If the founders of analytic philosophy have had a lasting influence on the field, their influence at this point in time is far less direct. On this point, I think that Scott Soames (2017) is exactly right when

he says that: "Today, what remains of the original impulses of the analytic tradition isn't a set of doctrines, but a pattern of interests and ways of philosophizing. All the original interests – in logic, language, mathematics, and science – continue in new forms." You can't simply reduce the history of analytic philosophy to a continued set of core doctrines or inviolable beliefs that persist over time. Instead, there is a somewhat vague, but nonetheless real, set of interests and methods which, although they have changed over time, still resemble the interests and methods of the early analytic philosophers.

At this point in our discussion, we have an important clue as to which "interests and ways of philosophizing" we need to examine. We know now that it is possible to hold different assumptions about the proper role and value of belief, and that those different assumptions can be more friendly or more hostile to religious belief. So we now ask about the role and importance of the concept of "belief" in analytic philosophy. Do the "interests and ways of philosophizing" assume a concept of "belief" that is tacitly favorable to atheism?

Belief in Analytic Philosophy

So what do analytic philosophers think about "belief"? As it turns out, the answer is "not much." Although understanding the role of belief was important to the pre-analytic pragmatist philosophers, it has been relegated to a supporting role by the founders of analytic philosophy, and the tradition continues to this day.

Here, Soames (2017) is again useful. He rightly dismisses any core set of doctrines or "precise methodology." Rather:

> [Analytic philosophy] is a discrete historical tradition stemming from Frege, Moore, Russell, Wittgenstein, and the logical positivists, characterized by respect for science and common sense, belief in the relevance of logic and language for philosophy, emphasis on precision and clarity of argumentation, suspicion of a priori metaphysics, and elevation of the goals of truth and knowledge over inspiration, moral uplift, and spiritual comfort – plus a dose of professional specialization.

This chapter is not the place to discuss the entire landscape of analytic philosophy (which is vast). But we can say with no fear of being contradicted that a large proportion of analytic philosophy is concerned with understanding how knowledge is possible, especially scientific knowledge. Analytic

philosophers have typically framed this problem in a way that includes a question of meaning and another question of justification.

Consider a simple sentence:

1. "The sun rises in the east."

This sentence, in order to be part of a correct scientific theory, must (a) have a determinable meaning, and (b) be true, or at least be well justified (other conditions may be necessary, but we'll focus on these two). Discussions of these two criteria are the places where we tend to find analytic philosophers concerned with belief. We'll briefly examine each in turn, and this will provide us with important clues as to why there are so many atheists among analytic philosophers.

Meaning and Belief

To understand scientific theories, and knowledge in general, we have to understand the content of those scientific theories – in other words, we should understand what they mean. Although sentences such as (1) may have an obvious meaning, there are other cases in which the apparent meaning of the sentence poses significant philosophical puzzles. And those puzzles are often illuminated by considering meaning in the context of someone's beliefs.

Another of the founders of analytic philosophy, Gottleib Frege, famously posed what has become known as "Frege's puzzle." It is a puzzle about names, and it goes like this. When a single thing has two names, it shouldn't matter which name you use in a sentence – that is, changing the name doesn't affect the truth of the sentence. For example, Clark Kent and Superman are names of the same person. So, if it is true that:

2. Clark Kent is over six feet tall.

Then it should also be true that:

3. Superman is over six feet tall.

The sentences are about the man himself, not about his name. If that man is over six feet tall, then it doesn't matter what we happen to call him when we report on his height. The sentences have the same meaning. Put another way, if we were to say that:

2a. Clark Kent is less than six feet tall.

3a. Superman is over six feet tall.

then we would be contradicting ourselves. Statements (2a) and (3a) cannot both be true because any statement that is true of Clark Kent must also be true of Superman, since "they" are really the same person.

But things get puzzling when we start to consider the meaning of sentences that involve a person's beliefs. For example, consider the following two sentences:

4. Lois believes that Superman is strong.

5. Lois believes that Clark Kent is not strong.

The puzzle is that (4) and (5) can both be true, even though Clark Kent *is* Superman. They are not contradictory in the same way that (2a) and (3a) are contradictory. Thus, there is something about belief that changes the meanings of sentences in an important way. And so, if we are to understand meaning, we need to understand what's different about (4) and (5) such that they are *not* contradictory even though similar sentences such as (2a) and (3a) not involving belief *are* contradictory.

It is not our place here to try to solve Frege's puzzle. A number of solutions have been posed, each with the goal of helping to understand the nature of meaning, and especially how meaning is affected by the contexts in which names appear. Rather, our focus here is on the role that belief plays in analytic philosophical discussions.

As I've noted above, there are only a few contexts within analytic philosophy in which belief is commonly discussed. Puzzles about the nature of meaning are one. But these discussions do not have the goal of understanding the nature of belief itself, but simply use cases involving belief in order to frame a discussion or pose other problems that are taken to be more important. In this case, analytic philosophers begin with the overarching goal of understanding the nature of knowledge and especially of scientific knowledge. This requires a theory of meaning. But meaning becomes puzzling when we start to think about sentences having the form, "So-and-so believes that such-and-such." Thus, we see that belief itself isn't taken to be of much intrinsic interest. Instead, belief is relevant only as a way of getting to (what analytic philosophers take to be) more important questions about meaning and thereby to understanding how scientific knowledge is possible. We will elaborate on this point a bit later.

Truth and Belief

The other place within analytic philosophy in which we see extended discussions of belief is in epistemology, the theory of knowledge. Given the fact that analytic philosophy is concerned in large part with how scientific and other types of knowledge are possible, we shouldn't be surprised to find that epistemology is a huge, sprawling subset of analytic philosophy, concerned with a variety of interrelated questions. Primary among those questions are:

1. How is knowledge of the external world possible?
2. How is scientific knowledge distinct from other types of knowledge (if it is)?
3. What does it mean to say that a sentence or proposition is "true" or "false"?

Each of these questions is readily cast into a form about belief:

1. When does a belief about the external world count as "knowledge"?
2. Are beliefs formed by scientific methods distinctive in some important way?
3. Under what conditions is a belief "true" or "false"?

Because of the centrality of epistemic questions to analytic philosophy and the close relationship between beliefs and knowledge, it is important to be able to define precisely what a "belief" is. As usual, we shall begin with Bertrand Russell, and we will find that his influence on this issue has lasted right up to the present day.

Russell, in his "The Problems of Philosophy," considers the statement:

1. Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio.

Then he asks what this "belief" of Othello amounts to. Russell's answer to this question is heavily influenced by the role that belief will play in the large epistemic questions that he seeks to answer. Specifically, he wants to answer questions about truth and falsity, justification, and knowledge. Accordingly, his definition of "belief" must be such as to help him answer those questions.

Given the work to which a concept of "belief" will be put to use, Russell is led almost inexorably to a specific definition of "belief." A belief is a specific kind of relationship between a human mind and other terms. As Russell (2001) puts it:

> the relation called "believing" is knitting together into one complex whole the four terms Othello, Desdemona, loving, and Cassio. What is called belief

> or judgement is nothing but this relation of believing or judging, which relates a mind to several things other than itself. An *act* of belief or of judgement is the occurrence between certain terms at some particular time, of the relation of believing or judging.

As usual, Russell's quick assertion belies a more sophisticated picture that needs to be unpacked. Although I cannot hope to do justice to Russell's worldview in the short space of this chapter, we can approximate it well enough for present purposes.

A belief for Russell is like a sentence containing several different terms. In this example, "Desdemona loves Cassio" is a sentence containing three terms, two of which are names and the other ("loves") is a relationship. The belief itself is a relationship between Othello's mind and the three terms "Desdemona," "loves," and "Cassio."

If we think of belief as a relationship in the mind of the believer among various terms, then there is a perfectly straightforward way to think about when a belief is "true" or "false" – namely, the belief is true when there is a corresponding relationship among the real things the terms refer to. If in Othello's mind there is a relationship "loves" that holds between the terms "Desdemona" and "Cassio," then Othello's belief is true if there is a corresponding relationship between the woman Desdemona and the man Cassio. As Russell (2001) puts it:

> Thus a belief is *true* when it *corresponds* to a certain associated complex, and *false* when it does not. Assuming, for the sake of definiteness, that the objects of the belief are two terms and a relation, the terms being put in a certain order by the "sense" of the believing, then if the two terms in that order are united by the relation into a complex, the belief is true; if not, it is false. This constitutes the definition of truth and falsehood that we were in search of.

This is a version of the so-called "correspondence theory of truth," that a belief is true if it corresponds in some appropriate way to the world. Russell's definition of "belief" wasn't just plucked from thin air; it was designed specifically to make the correspondence theory of truth easy to formulate and understand.

This last point is important. Within any mature field of intellectual inquiry, including analytic philosophy, definitions and conceptual frameworks are not created in an ad hoc way. Definitions are chosen strategically, for the purpose of advancing the most important and interesting questions. For example, Russell could have chosen to define a "belief" as some kind of psychological state or some kind of behavioral predisposition (as others have). Such an

approach would have been perfectly reasonable. However, defining a belief as a psychological state would have done little to advance his overarching project of understanding truth and falsity, knowledge and ignorance. Instead, Russell made the deliberate decision to define belief as a certain relationship among terms in the mind of the believer; this greatly facilitates his project by making it straightforward to define the conditions in which a belief is true or false.

The Present Day

As I have mentioned above, I agree fully with Scott Soames that the continuity of analytic philosophy consists in a set of interests and values that has been shared up to the present day. Although the range of philosophical questions has grown since Russell's time, and one can always find respectable analytic philosophers whose philosophical values are not in the mainstream, it is still the case that the field is largely preoccupied with questions about knowledge and meaning, especially scientific knowledge and the meaning of scientific theories. As we have seen, these large, important problems have a dramatic impact on how other questions, definitions, and concepts are formulated. In particular, the concept of "belief" arises primarily in discussions of meaning, truth, and knowledge. And so we should expect to find that the choice of questions concerning belief and our working definition of "belief" has been deliberately made to help us understand those questions.

So where does this leave the debate between atheists and theists? For religious believers such as William James, the salient features of a belief are psychological – when we hold certain beliefs, this has an effect on our well-being and on how we live our lives. But for the analytic philosopher, these psychological aspects of beliefs are not false, but *irrelevant* because they get us nowhere in understanding truth and knowledge. Accordingly, the very features of belief that are so important for James have literally been defined out of existence by analytic philosophy because they don't align with the most pressing research problems.

Small wonder, then, that we find such a large percentage of atheists in analytic philosophy. Given that the moral and psychological aspects of belief have been driven into irrelevance by mainstream analytic philosophy, we should expect this academic discipline to be fertile ground for atheism.

I'll conclude this discussion with a small caveat and an observation. The caveat is that nothing I've said in this chapter is meant to suggest that theists cannot find a home in academic analytic philosophy. Many do, and many of

them are highly respected analytic philosophers. Some have had impactful careers arguing for their religious beliefs in the analytic philosophy literature. That's the caveat. The observation is that our discussion in this chapter allows us to make a prediction about their work. If they are to engage in this project within the confines of analytic philosophy, we should expect their work to be quite different from the pragmatic style of William James. Specifically, we should find that their arguments for the existence of God should be concerned with the epistemic justification of such beliefs, not with their pragmatic benefits. They should be concerned, in other words, with arguments that we are justified in believing that God exists, not that we are better off with such beliefs. Accordingly, we see revivals of classic arguments such as the ontological argument, the first cause argument, and so on within theistic analytic philosophy. This is in fact what we do see, led by philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig, among others. But the fact that they engage the debate on the terms laid down by the founders of analytic philosophy further shows the lasting influence of Russell and his contemporaries.

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33

Naturalism

JOHN R. SHOOK

On the question of God, both religious and non-religious thinkers typically regard naturalism as the obvious and primary way to challenge supernaturalism. Naturalism is distinctive among philosophical worldviews for its reliance on the sciences. Other chapters recount how developments in specific scientific fields, such as biology, affected the intellectual climate around the question of God's existence. Naturalism's own role also deserves to be told. Naturalism as a comprehensive worldview only congealed during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and confronted God with the staunchest atheist philosophy to ever challenge supernaturalism. Modern naturalism elevated four main approaches to prominence for refuting supernaturalism: (1) scientific theorizing is genuinely explanatory, while religion is not; (2) nature's energies are causally closed, forbidding divine interaction; (3) scientific skepticism is warranted toward alleged revelations and miracles; and (4) naturalistic theories explaining religion's origin and function need no deities.

Naturalism, Science, and Theism

Naturalism and supernaturalism do sound like contrary worldviews. Supernaturalism asserts that more is real than just nature; naturalism denies any sort of reality beyond nature. Graham Oppy is an atheist philosopher who regards philosophical naturalism's plausibility, more so than the prestige of science, as an effective argument against theism (Oppy 2013). On religion's side, prominent theologian William Lane Craig takes theism's main opposition to be naturalism, and other theological voices echo that stance (Craig 2008; Craig and Copan 2009). However, more worldviews are available, and atheism has several homes. Pantheism claims that nature is God; naturalists and supernaturalists typically deem pantheism to be implausible, or tantamount to atheism. Dualism asserts both natural and non-natural realities, but

it need not find God among them. Idealism denies that nature is fully real on its own, yet the ideality to reality need not include any divinity. Phenomenalism (or strict positivism) assigns reality to the strictly apparent and phenomenal, but nothing godly may be manifest among what is narrowly empirical. Nothing prevents dualism, idealism, or phenomenalism from harboring an atheist stance. Supernaturalism harbors theism: among non-natural realities there is a God (or gods). Naturalism must deny supernaturalism, thereby denying theism, and so it is atheistic in that sense. Some varieties of naturalism can be receptive to much about religious experience and religiosity toward life and nature, but no naturalism countenances theistic supernaturalism (Crosby and Stone 2018; Oppy 2018).

Proponents of supernaturalism accomplish little by arguing merely for dualism or idealism. (Phenomenalism is little help for theism, and phenomenology aids theism where it supports dualism or idealism over naturalism.) "There must be more than nature" completes no argument for any deity. On the other hand, "There can be no reality beyond nature" argues for ruling out all deities. Due to that dialectical asymmetry, God's defenders often think that the lack of proof for "There is no reality beyond nature" is a good argument for God. This fallacy (an argument from ignorance) energizes the devout wanting to witness naturalism's embarrassment and their faith's vindication. All the same, on philosophical grounds alone, no straightforward argumentative victory could be expected. Although naturalism and supernaturalism cannot both be right, they could both be mistaken; they have vulnerabilities to long-standing philosophical objections and critiques. Philosophy, for its part, has epistemic resources for fostering skepticism toward both, and other worldviews too. Measured against those high standards, a worldview at most hopes to be less implausible than the rest. The formulation of naturalism therefore matters, as some versions may endure skeptical criticism better than others.

Naturalism in its broadest sense is that worldview that takes shape through observation, reason, and science, by prioritizing explanations justified through rational proto-science and fully empirical science. On any matter, established theories of mature science are preferable to thoughtful proto-science. Still, proto-science need not be ignored by naturalism. Plausible hypotheses designed for passing logical and empirical testing, so long as they harbor no non-scientific notions, can play a role in naturalism even if they do not join the ranks of highly confirmed theories. For example, the materialism of Democritus and Lucretius, postulating only unfeeling atoms and void between them, was only proto-scientific, yet that atomism is rightly

classed as a naturalism, despite the way that twentieth-century physics surpassed it. By contrast, panpsychism and hylozoism cannot count as naturalistic. The attribution of feeling or awareness, or a little liveliness, to the constituents of the world has always been non-scientific.

Naturalism is grounded on empirical evidence as sifted by logical inference in the methodologies of scientific investigation. Naturalism's core vulnerabilities are hence threefold: How would naturalism fully account for experience, reasoning, and science itself? This chapter cannot debate those philosophical issues, but they are not opportunities to advance theism. Arguing that naturalism cannot account for experience is the purview of dualism, idealism, and phenomenalism, yet any advantage they might gain over naturalism is far from a demonstration of God. Arguing that naturalism cannot account for reason itself is the purview of rationalistic dualism and idealism. Naturalism's resistance to Platonism and absolutism is an engaging dispute for philosophers, but supernatural theism must additionally prove that God lives among the forms, or Ideas, or the Absolute (Craig 2016). The claim that naturalism cannot explain science, because evolution would not produce humans intelligent enough to be scientific, does not yield plausible arguments (Beilby 2002).

Varieties of Naturalism

Naturalism need not worry that its grounds will be swept away from under it. Its relationship with science does deserve elaboration. Five primary attitudes taken by worldviews can be distinguished:

"No science": Science cannot be believed since science cannot explain anything.
"Values over science": Science should be contradicted on all matters that are important to human beings.
"Science bounded": Science can be contradicted on many matters beyond its own competence.
"Valuable science": Science should not be contradicted on any matters since its explanations are important to human beings.
"Only science": Science cannot be contradicted since science can explain everything.

No naturalism can agree with "no science" or "values over science." Naturalism hopes for more than conciliation, by seeking compatibility with all human values worth pursuing. Mere conciliation is represented by the

"science bounded" option, where science and non-science (such as religion) cannot conflict with each other as they together explain all reality, each in its distinctive manner. Because this option amounts to dualism, no authentic naturalism resides here, even if prominent scientists have endorsed a metaphysical compromise (such as Gould 1999).

Two main modes of naturalism remain. (Finer distinctions are given in Shook 2011.) "Valuable science" only says that for anything interesting and important, science can offer its inquiries and hypotheses to help build up full explanations. Nothing is satisfactorily explained unless and until adequate scientific inquiries have contributed information alongside other sources. By contrast, "only science" says that only science can satisfactorily explain anything, and alternative sources of information are worth far less by comparison. Two prominent examples from the twentieth century may serve as contrasts. Eliminative materialism (e.g. W. V. Quine) asserts that only theoretical entities discerned by the natural sciences, above all physics, are real. If something exists in some way, it must be reducible to what is real, by being composed of, or being an aspect or property of, what is strictly physical (Orenstein 2002). Pragmatic naturalism (e.g. John Dewey) asserts that no prior limit can be set on science's present or future capacity to inquire anywhere experience can go, and although whatever is encountered has its own reality, comprehending it should be largely shaped by what science can learn about it (Shook 2000). Partisan labels can get in the way, especially for those unfamiliar with philosophy's history; let us henceforth only mention "narrow naturalism" and "broad naturalism" as need arises.

One further point about naturalism in general is helpful. Naturalism's task is not to justify or defend science's current best theories. The sciences themselves bear the responsibility for reasonably justifying their theories. Naturalism proceeds from a fallible and modest scientific realism – no scientific theory is immune from revision or replacement due to additional evidence, but highly confirmed theories do model natural processes to a fair degree of accuracy. Naturalism attempts to elaborate a comprehensive and coherent worldview based on experience, reason, and science, and defends science's capacity to explore and theorize about anything, without interference from tradition, superstition, dogmatism, or ideology. Ensuring that the sciences are all coherently describing the same nature is not the task of any scientific field, yet only science tests and confirms naturalistic proposals about accommodations and adjustments among scientific theories.

Versions of naturalism can survive philosophical skepticism while aligning with science. Supernatural theism deserves much philosophical skepticism,

along with its vulnerabilities to scientific knowledge, against which religion enjoys no automatic immunity.

Science Is More Explanatory than Religion

Supernaturalism can appear to have a built-in explanatory advantage over science, so long as science cannot fully account for the universe's existence. Perhaps scientific theorizing must forever be inadequate to that task, no matter how it theorizes about ultimate origins. When science postulates X (laws of quantum physics, for example), an explanation for the availability of X is now needed, and if Y may account for X then an explanation for Y is needed, and so on. Nothing about religion prevents it from displaying a similar explanatory inadequacy. Gods birthing gods who birth more gods, who build up the world along the way, are not full explanations, even if a religion's origin myths begin with a parental primeval deity (polytheism), or they relate the deeds of a single deity (monotheism).

Seeking prior origins is reasonable, but certainties about knowing the "ultimate" origin are unreasonable. Claiming certain belief about how everything started only indicates where explanatory thinking has arbitrarily halted. This is no less true for theology than mythology. Neither theology nor science gains an explanatory advantage by proposing that an ultimate *Z* had to come from "nothing," or that *Z* is "necessarily" real. If one advances such a proposal, then so may the other, to neither's advantage or credit. To credit nothing with yielding something is the absence of explanation. To think that *Z*'s unreality is inconceivable only explains how one must think, and fails to prove that *Z* must be real. God is ultimately responsible, according to theism, but rendering a divine act entirely mysterious, as utterly mysterious as God, is admitting the absence of explanation. Supernaturalism, whether it hosts personal or impersonal god(s), holds no explanatory advantage over science so long as God is practically incomprehensible.

Theology can allow God to be somewhat understandable by depicting God as an agent thoughtfully pursing means to ends. Postulating a willful and sentient agent to explain observed events is reasonable so long as less complex matters cannot suffice as an explanation. The behavioral and social sciences, and history, justifiably deal with person-level activities for explanations of socially complex matters. The scientific preference for postulating something of lesser complexity to explain greater complexity runs counter to the religious preference for using greater complexity to explain the less

complex. Rare exceptions are theological, not mythological. Christianity's doctrine of divine simplicity renders a Trinitarian God incomprehensibly monotheistic, and explanatorily mysterious (Dolezal 2011). Hinduism's Brahman is impersonally ultimate, but the gods are generated from it. Religions make personal gods such as Jesus and Krishna appealing to the faithful without hesitation.

Science hesitates to postulate agents because scientific methods prefer regular and stable relations between X and Y in order for X to satisfactorily explain Y. However, the high complexity of agents allows them to treat similar situations differently, depending on their shifting purposes and creative thoughts. Even divine agents of the most reliable character possess wills less than completely predictable, since wills are not attributed to things always behaving mechanically. A deity forever performing the same "deeds" with strict regularity becomes indistinguishable from one of nature's repetitive cycles or insentient powers (like earth's four seasons, or a physical force). By contrast, deities who perform unnatural deeds because they want to do them would be powers distinguishable from nature's ways, but accounting for each surprising event as it happens with a divinely willful act amounts to a "post-hoc" method that is inferior to scientific hypotheses reliably predicting future events (Shook 2018, ch. 8).

The appeal to divine agency sets up a dilemma for religion: either increase explanatory reasonableness for a deity by decreasing its agency, or maximize a deity's agency to account for surprises while eliminating explanatory reasonableness. Religions naturally prefer the second option (miracles surpass understanding, after all), while theological approaches to the first option expose God to disconfirmation by features of nature that God should not want. The argument from design positively credits God with all features of creation, but the argument from evil negatively discredits God with creation's bad features. Faulting other creative powers for the bad features does not increase the reasonableness of postulating unnatural agents (Shook 2016).

Theologies about a personal God have few remaining options. Only at personal–social levels would postulating a personal deity have a possibly explanatory role, and only through reliably regular relations at those levels could a personal deity have any explanatory power. Scientific method cannot outright forbid the postulation of person-like agency functioning with and within social groups, if their histories, norms, and ways are otherwise inexplicable. Although that sort of "deity" would seem somewhat supra-personal from an individual's perspective, it cannot just be transcendent while participating in human experience and activity with its stable character.

Only the most humanistic liberal theologies could take an interest in something godly functioning at humanity's level (although the mythic god-become-man is a precedent), along with philosophies of religion describing religious experience and community in earthly terms. For example, among American philosophers, Josiah Royce discerned Christ's spirit within the loving community's effort to harmonize in mutual loyalty, and John Dewey labeled as God the cooperating whole of nature-and-humans realizing moral ideals. So long as no scientific knowledge is controverted, broad naturalism can be hospitable to personalist interpretations of sociocultural phenomena.

The Causal Closure of Nature

Theistic supernaturalism may expect God to occasionally intervene in the course of worldly events by making something happen that would not have otherwise happened. An unnatural interaction occurs despite natural forces and violates nature's laws, temporarily suspending or obstructing them. A divine intervention cannot merely supplement nature's ways and works. If an event happens that would have happened just as it does without any divine intervention, then it is pointless to credit God. Only an event that would not have happened as it did without God's involvement could be credited to godly action, so in that event, nature's own ways would somehow have been prevented from operating as they regularly do.

Science must strongly doubt that godly interventions have ever happened, or could happen. For science, every natural event is caused by something equally natural. Nature is therefore closed to outside interventions of any non-natural origin, including God. This causal closure principle, stated broadly here, cannot serve by itself to show that God does not exist. Some versions of theistic supernaturalism, such as deism, do not expect God to intervene after creating the world. All the same, given causal closure, the amount of possible worldly evidence for God is dramatically diminished if not eliminated. This argument against evidence for God is not based on denying that God is a *cause* of worldly events. What is closed is the totality of natural causes; conceiving how a supernatural being *causes* a natural event seems impossible (and theology typically agrees). However a deity may want to be responsible for worldly interventions, causal closure is incompatible with their occurrence.

The plausibility of causal closure is not due to science's ability to completely comprehend nature. Physics, for example, is not finalized by

confirmed theories explaining all physical phenomena. That goal may never be reached. However, this admitted incompleteness is not the same thing as admitting that violations of known physical laws are possible or detectible. Sciences about regular natural laws and lawfully predictable events, such as the physical sciences, cannot be reconciled with divine interactions. Physics does not have to be agnostic about events allegedly occurring in violation of known physical laws. Physicists would eagerly investigate them, and if they are empirically observed, opportunities for theory revision then beckon, but the lawfulness of natural forces is not abandoned. Furthermore, religions rarely point to observably repeating events – unique events are preferred. Science's inability to fully investigate a past unique event from an allegedly divine cause does not compel science to stay agnostic. Science is reasonable for severely doubting that known physical laws have had odd exceptions or lapses, and naturalism agrees.

Theistic supernaturalism may complain that the principle of causal closure is only a postulate of naturalism, rather than anything established by scientific fields. If causal closure were just a postulate, then godly intervention is not ruled out by scientific knowledge, but only by naturalism, which appears to be begging the question against supernaturalism. No question is begged here, as naturalism does not supply first principles for science. The reasonableness of causal closure is based on the way that scientific theories about nature's laws have ample predictive successes, while religions talking about miracles have none.

If evidence from the natural world is ruled out, theology may turn to the life of the mind. For theism, God is spiritual, not material – perhaps God contacts or influences human mentality? However, any influence God could have over a mind seems futile unless that mental change led to a brain change and on to some adjustment in behavior and alteration of conduct. In recent decades, a specific version of causal closure fostered by narrow naturalism has been applied to argue against dualism. On that argument, mental states and events cannot have any causal effect on brain states or processes, because only *physical* causes can produce *physical* effects (Papineau 2009). A physical effect arising from a non-physical cause implies that some amount of physical energy abruptly appears in nature, but that violates the law of conservation of energy and the principle of least action. Non-reductive approaches to psychological and mental phenomena, which are classed under broad naturalism, do not imply violations of physical laws. However, broad naturalism cannot allow any supernatural influence over minds, since they remain embodied and

embedded: the mental life has its home with brain processes, bodily behaviors, and social conduct here on earth. Finally, even if some sort of mild dualism survives causal closure arguments, God's existence is not thereby made more likely, since a successful argument for God would still be required.

In summary, science is rarely presented with good candidates for possible non-natural events, and experimental inquiry and theorizing renders them, sooner or later, compatible with natural lawfulness and assimilated into nature. Theology has no grounds for claiming that science will not be able to continue to maintain that progress in the future. Religions instead focus on the past, when the most impressive miracles are supposed to have happened right in front of credulous observers.

Scientific Skepticism Toward Miracles

Events happening in the world due to God's acts rather than nature's ways would be miraculous, in a broad sense of "miracle." (If angels perform miracles, skepticism toward unnatural causes applies equally.) For religions, a divine intervention able to astound and count as empirical evidence for God takes place where it is accessible and observable by people. David Basinger's tighter definition takes into account why miracles are supposed to be persuasive: A miracle is "an unusual, unexpected, observable event due in part to the intentional direct interventive activity of God" (Basinger 2018, 17). Theologians like to quibble about cutting-edge science's capacity to grapple with surprising experimental data or gaps in complex theoretical paradigms. Religions instead place their faith in astonishing tales about such things as virgin births, speaking with animals, and dead bodies returning to life.

Reasonably denying that miraculous events have ever happened only calls for common sense familiarity with the world. As David Hume argued, even sincere testimony is not more credible when compared against the vast storehouse of human experience, especially if independent corroboration is lacking (Fogelin 2003). An acquaintance with basic scientific knowledge is not necessary for due skepticism, although it serves to buttress common sense. Naturalism adds a generic argument against all miracles:

1. The natural and biological sciences, from physics and chemistry to physiology and medicine, possess enough knowledge about earthly matters to place any alleged miracle, past or present, in serious doubt.

2. Scientific expertise and testing techniques are sufficient for investigating ongoing "miraculous" phenomena, either exposing them as non-existent or revealing their natural causes.
3. Therefore, no alleged miracle counts as evidence for God.

Religions pay little heed to scientific skepticism. The faithful are impressed by news of fresh miracles, and religions large and small never lack an abundant supply. Visions appear before the devout, yogis perform impossible feats of bodily energy, statues drip blood from their eyes or hands, intercessory prayer results in amazing health recoveries – each religion offers its characteristic miracles crafted to uplift the spirits of their own believers. None survive critical investigation (Randi 1987; Masters et al. 2006; Nickell 2013).

Despite the proliferation of miracle stories, each religion thinks that only its own miracles merit universal credence. Theology has no generic argument from miracles for God, because there is no singular miracle able to be convincing to most religious people. Each religious person naturally thinks over 99 percent of all miracle tales ever told around the world must be fables or superstitions. One's common sense, and perhaps some acquaintance with science, lets a person know when to be skeptical. Yet that good sense stops working for miracles from one's own religion. Which is the more objective kind of reasoning? Subjectively believing in miracles because they are familiar and comforting does not make them objectively reasonable.

The subjective side of belief accounts for the vast import that believers place in miracles. Miracles in that stricter sense are unnatural events of religious significance (Basinger 2018, 2–3). Taking a religion's extraordinary tales to be significant reports of miracles is something religious people can do, because they belong to that religion. People who believe in miracles already believe in a deity; a subjective propensity to accept miracles cannot objectively count as good evidence for God (Corner 2007). Theism is not reasonable just because science has not offered a natural explanation of an alleged miracle (contra Swinburne [1970] and Larmer [1988, 114]).

Consider this argument for God: "Science can't explain how Lazarus came back to life, but Christianity says that Jesus did it, then this satisfactory explanation must be accepted, and so God is real." This argument does not reach its conclusion without ample question-begging. One does not have to first agree that Lazarus really came back to life; no one except a Christian is tempted to think that Jesus brought Lazarus back to life; and no one relying on common sense imagines that the biblical passage counts as a satisfactory explanation of Jesus' deed. Someone who supposes that Lazarus really did

come to life already holds an unreasonable belief, so this argument cannot get further than its first dubious premise. That belief in the Lazarus story is unreasonable, not because it has been proven that God does not exist, but because common sense and scientific knowledge take the objective stand on that tale's extreme improbability (Flew 2006).

A direct encounter with God is a special kind of miracle. How does naturalism justify doubts about divine visitations through visions, messages, or other sensory manifestations? Richard Swinburne grounds his defense of visitation miracles on this premise: "it is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present, then probably x is present: what one seems to perceive is probably so" (Swinburne 1979, 254; consult Everitt 2004, ch. 8). We do grant credibility to direct perception, except under extraordinary circumstances, and the appearance of God must count as highly unusual. Common sense is not unreasonable for doubting such cases. Theism follows common sense, for the most part. Theism is not in the business of demonstrating the reality of all the world's deities. Which God is appearing to which people?

William Alston starts from Swinburne's principle of generous credulity about perceptual experience, and adds a second principle: So long as a believer is participating in a group doxastic practice, nothing outside that practice can prove that the believer is mistaken. Anyone already in a god-believing group, forming and maintaining beliefs in their distinctive manner, knows that they are justified in their beliefs about encountering God (Alston 1991, 183, 194, 227). For Alston, only a belief formed within a doxastic practice can bear upon the accuracy of another belief within that practice. Beliefs formed by a different (ungodly) practice cannot count as evidence against a god belief within a (godly) practice. Being a member of a doxastic group means that you can presuppose that your group won't be shown to be wrong (so long as everyone in your group stays so dogmatic). Alston's appeal to (godly) doxastic practice does not directly argue for God's reality, because it does not have to. On Alston's account, people within a godly doxastic practice already know their deity from their experience so no argument is needed there, while people within ungodly doxastic practices have no evidence for or against that godly knowledge. Alston's doxastic theism privileges the tenacity of conviction over logic, multiplies gods beyond belief, divides theists against each other, and fails to establish the objective reality of God.

Alston tries to maintain a façade of objectivity. He appeals to religious experience of a vaguely Christian sort, allowing non-Christians to experience God too. Could humanity join a single doxastic practice and know the One

God? That hope seems unlikely. Alston says that objections to his position on mystical experience largely come from naturalism (Alston 1991, 255). That is not the case here – no naturalistic tenet has been mentioned. In fact, Alston's view of doxastic practices blocks that ecumenical goal. No theologian or philosopher can tell staunch believers to converge on one thin notion of God, since doxastic practices are immune to external advice, as Alston depicts them. Alston's doxastic practices must proliferate just as religious experiences do. Religions do not seem interested in coalescing into a philosophical monotheism, or a murky mysticism.

Alston offers a third principle to forestall an abundance of gods: "It is a reasonable supposition that a practice would not have persisted over large segments of the population unless it was putting people into effective touch with some aspect(s) of reality and proving itself as such by its fruits" (Alston 1991, 170). Yet there is nothing reasonable here. The practice of persecuting "witches" is age-old and still prevalent in many countries, but it is unreasonable to think that witches, or their connections with the spiritual world, are probably real. Religions shedding their superstitions could not accept this principle, nor would religions agree that comparing their size indicates which deity is real. On Alston's model, the disciples of Jesus were not justified in believing that they encountered anything godly, since their "doxastic practice" was not established and too small – yet if they were not justified believers, later Christians could not be, either. Religions cannot recognize themselves in Alston's model of godly groups.

Natural Explanations for Religion

Theology has become far less antagonistic toward efforts to account for humanity's religiosity in natural terms. On the presumption that humanity's natural capacities, when rightly applied, yield what is good for people, a human propensity toward religiosity would be good, and hence reasonable for all. The traditional argument from universal consent, pointing to the prevalence of belief in God worldwide, was usually paired with the theological view that human nature has an innate intuition of, or inherent orientation toward, God (De Roover 2014). Religion's naturality was never in doubt for religions. Fitting naturalistic explanations for religion into that broader theistic account could allow belief in God to seem naturally reasonable. On that view, non-believers unnaturally and unreasonably deviate from their own humanity and deny themselves what is good for humanity.

This theological strategy for both naturalizing and normalizing religiosity calls for naturalism's rebuttal. Naturalism still has the straightforward objective of showing how natural explanations for religion omit the supernatural, so nothing about human religiosity requires anything godly to be involved (Boyer 2001, 2010). Theistic religions must disagree, since their origins involve some sort of deity, and each religion regards belief in that deity as entirely normal. This section illustrates how naturalism resists the normalization of god belief while removing God from human religiosity. Although human beings have propensities for being religious, the proper use of all our capacities allows plenty of room for doubting that theistic supernaturalism is reasonable.

To say that the human brain naturally engenders religiosity and religious beliefs hides an equivocation. For naturalism, all cognitive processes and their psychological manifestations in attitudes and beliefs are natural matters, since nothing unnatural is making them occur. Being non-religious has no less of a natural basis here than being religious. Nevertheless, focusing on the naturality of god belief has allowed the field of "neurotheology" to infer that god believers are cognitively normal, and hence have valid beliefs about the supernatural. Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary in *The Spiritual Brain* adopt a neutral pose toward brain science, but they are far from neutral about a higher power:

> The external reality of God cannot be directly proven or disproven by studying what happens to people's brains when they have mystical experiences. Demonstrating that specific brain states are associated with spiritual/mystical experiences neither shows that such experiences are "nothing but" brain states nor proves that God exists. It shows only that it is reasonable to believe that mystics do contact a power outside themselves.
>
> (Beauregard and O'Leary 2009, 38)

Andrew Newberg offers a less biased approach for neurotheology: "Neurotheology is a more recent attempt at discerning how the study of the human mind and brain . . . relates to the pursuit of religions and religious experience" (Newberg 2010, 2). The brain sciences, in concert with behavioral sciences, are arriving at tentative hypotheses about how religious experiences and beliefs arise from normal brain functioning. It cannot be presumed that religiosity results of regrettable brain malfunctioning. Naturalism does warn against an "Is–Ought" fallacy lurking as religious brains are studied. How any brain is ordinarily functioning implies little about how a person ought to hold beliefs. Common psychological matters attributable to ordinary brain

processes – such as cognitive biases, learned framings, and lingering prejudices – easily result in unjustifiable and unreasonable beliefs. Living a religious life according to its values is not the target of naturalism's skepticism. Beliefs about the supernatural, inculcated and reinforced by appeals to cognitive biases, magical thinking, and emotional weaknesses, are unreasonably propagated by religions (Shook 2017).

The overall strategy of naturalism, assembling naturalizations of religiosity without normalizing theism, counters arguments for theism that appeal to human proclivities and priorities. Too many appeals preclude even a listing; examples include fear of death, existential anxiety, group cohesion, and psychosomatic healing. A general argument for theism from psychological need will have to serve in this limited space.

1. Theistic belief frequently satisfies some important psychological needs.
2. Humans naturally commit to beliefs satisfying their important needs.
3. Natural commitments to beliefs are reasonable.
4. Therefore, belief in theism is normally reasonable.

Gaps between these premises prevent them from adequately supporting the conclusion.

Premise 1 may be accurate for many people, but there are multiple ways to satisfy psychological needs, and not all psychological needs should be indulged. Premise 1 could read, "Theistic belief uniquely satisfies permanent psychological needs," but that is far less plausible, especially where religions play upon cognitive biases and emotional weaknesses to intensify the very needs that a deity is designed to satisfy. (Visions of eternal hell may be motivating, but they do not naturally occur to the non-religious mind.) Premise 2 seems accurate enough, but it reminds us how people commit to more satisfying beliefs, and theism may not be most satisfactory for all of life's needs. Premise 3 is a vague generality, unable to bear much of an argumentative burden. No belief by itself could be deemed reasonable just for its naturality – beliefs about empirical matters are weighed and reevaluated together, in vast webs of coherence relations enlarged and tested by ongoing experience. Perhaps a small portion of human beliefs are never tested or doubted by life, but god belief is evidently not among them.

The weaknesses to that general argument for theism points the way to a specific argument oft-heard from God's defenders.

5. Theistic belief uniquely satisfies permanent psychological needs.
6. Humans naturally commit to theism for its maximally satisfying benefits.

7. The natural commitment to theism is reasonably consistent with all experience.
8. Therefore, belief in theism is normally reasonable.

This argument's premises make falsifiable claims. Premises 5 and 6 make universal claims about humanity that lack confirmation from the social sciences. At the least, premises 5 and 6 are not accurate due to the significant percentage of non-theists in the world's population (Zuckerman and Shook 2017, 7–9). Theism's defenders cannot respond by claiming that non-theists unnaturally ignore deep psychological needs, since that claim needs support from the failed general argument. Premise 7 can be reasonably doubted, as the problem of evil indicates (Overall 2006). If premise 7 is understood as non-falsifiable because this world is precisely what God wants, then naturalists gladly step aside to let religious critics question that theodicy. In conclusion, supernatural theism is shown to be unreasonable by humanity's natural common sense and achievements of scientific knowledge.

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34

Existentialism

GARY FOSTER

"Existence precedes essence." The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre would use this phrase to characterize existentialism and limit the extension of the term in his essay "Existentialism is a humanism," which was first published in 1946. He had already used the phrase in his major work *Being and Nothingness*, originally published in 1943, but it is in the later work that he would use it to define the "movement." This proposition is less of a doctrinal statement than it is a characterization of a way of thinking or of an attitude toward life.

This attitude is one that was attributed not only to Sartre but also to a number of his contemporaries such as Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel. It is important to note that the latter two were Christians, which makes the umbrella term *existentialist* more difficult to define. The term has also been retrospectively applied to the nineteenth-century thinkers Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, the former of whom was also a Christian. Strictly speaking, the idea that existence precedes essence does not apply perfectly to Christian thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Marcel, and Jaspers, nor is it clear that it is consistent with Nietzsche's notion of a *will to power*. So, what is this attitude that unites these divergent thinkers and what does it have to do with atheism?

What these philosophers share is an approach to philosophy that focuses on human *existence* or first-person experience as opposed to the more abstract, objective viewpoint that had previously dominated western philosophy. In a paper delivered to the UK Sartre Society in 2013, Jonathan Webber makes a useful and important distinction between *existentialism* and *existential philosophy* (Webber 2013). The latter he characterizes as the broader category of which existentialism is a specific instance. According to Webber's distinction, "existence precedes essence" applies to the more narrowly defined group called existentialists, whereas existential philosophy characterizes more generally the approach of thinkers who ground ethics or

an account of the human condition on multiple features of human existence (death, freedom, contingency, etc.) as opposed to focusing on one feature such as happiness or duty. Sartre and Beauvoir both embraced the term existentialist, while Heidegger and Camus, for instance, denied that it applied to them. But, as Webber tells us, both were clearly "existential" philosophers. In what follows I will discuss the philosophical relation of atheism to both existential philosophy in general and existentialism specifically.

Nineteenth-Century Existential Thought

It might seem strange or forced to include a Christian thinker like Kierkegaard in a discussion of philosophical atheism, but I think there are good reasons for doing so. Kierkegaard, writing in the early part of the nineteenth century, was no stranger to Enlightenment thinking and so was aware of the threat that such views posed to belief in God. He was also well-schooled in the idealism of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, an approach that gave a "rational" account of Christianity and, on Kierkegaard's view, subordinated religious faith to the authority of reason. Indeed, it was in his response to Hegel's philosophy that we find a connection to atheism. As David James tells us in his article titled "The absolute paradox: Kierkegaard's argument against Hegel's account of the relation of faith to philosophy":

> Hegel thinks that, in the case of the Christian religion, it is also necessary to establish the possibility of reconciling faith with reason by demonstrating that the content of faith and the content of philosophy are identical . . . Hegel's attempt to establish this identity of content is motivated by the idea that the content of the Christian religion can and must be shown to be rational. The need to demonstrate the rationality of the Christian religion is for Hegel due to the demand for rational insight that he thinks is characteristic of a post-Enlightenment age, in which the highest right of the subject is to recognize nothing that I do not perceive as rational. (James 2007, 104–5)

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, rejects the idea that faith and reason must be reconciled. Even in the face of the post-Enlightenment pressure to reconcile Christian faith with reason, Kierkegaard stands firm regarding what he takes to be the essence of Christianity. The essence of the Christian life on his view is that faith involves a paradox – that God can be divine, eternal, transcendent while at the same time can enter human history and live as a mortal. The idea that God can be both eternal and can exist within human time or history is an offense to reason. Kierkegaard rejects the attempt to bring Christian belief

within the confines of universal reason. For him, faith is the key to Christian belief, and reason (and the *ethical* as an expression of reason) must be suspended.

It is not only in response to Hegel that we see this privileging of faith over reason in Kierkegaard's writings, but it is also expressed in his response to traditional arguments for the existence of God. In his *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard challenges the idea that God's existence can be derived from his so-called "works" of creation:

> what are the god's works? The works from which I want to demonstrate his existence do not immediately and directly exist, not at all. Or are the wisdom in nature or the goodness and wisdom in Governance right in front of our noses? Do we not encounter the most spiritual trials here, and is it ever possible to be finished with all these trials? But I still do not demonstrate God's existence from such an order of things, and even if I began, I would never finish and also would be obliged continually to live *in suspenso* lest something so terrible happen that my fragment of demonstration would be ruined. Therefore from what works do I demonstrate it? From the works regarded ideally – that is, as they do not appear directly and immediately. But then I do not demonstrate it from the works, after all, but only develop the ideality I have presupposed.
>
> (Kierkegaard 1985, 42)

Kierkegaard thinks that arguing from God's alleged works to God's existence involves circular reasoning since we must already presuppose that what exists (the wonders of nature, etc.) are the works of God and not the works of natural evolution, for instance. In this sense the "works" that appear are *idealized* – or are already understood as having been created by an intelligent being.

What is important for the purposes of this chapter is something that both his response to Hegel and his response to arguments for the existence of God share in common. Kierkegaard rejects the idea that belief in God is to be arrived at via a rational path. As in his discussion of stages of existence, the true religious life (what he calls Religiousness B) can only be arrived at when one's passion has exhausted the resources of reason (the universality of the ethical) and one discovers God through faith. The doctrine of the incarnation he tells us represents "a break with all thinking" (Kierkegaard 1992, 579). I suggest that Kierkegaard's view that the basis for Christian belief involves "a break with all thinking" opens the door to atheism intellectually speaking. Even though Kierkegaard saw his own work as putting his readers on the correct path to faith, from a philosophical perspective, he undermines the foundations of this belief.

Another figure of the nineteenth century who falls under the category of existential thinker and who is much less surprisingly connected to atheism is the German philosopher and philologist Friedrich Nietzsche. In the context of a discussion of atheism, we find in several places in his writings the declaration that "God is dead." But what did he mean by this claim and in what context was it written?

We hear this claim made in different sections of *The Gay Science* as well as in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Perhaps most notably it is expressed by the "madman" in 125 of the former: "'Where is God?' he cried; 'I'll tell you! *We have killed him* – you and I! We are all his murderers . . . There was never a greater deed'" (Nietzsche 2001, 119–20). Nietzsche makes clear what is meant by this phrase in 343 of the same book: "The greatest recent event – that 'God is dead'; that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable – is already starting to cast its first shadow over Europe" (Nietzsche 2001, 199). So, what he means by "God is dead" is that belief in God has died or it has been overcome. Elsewhere, in *The Anti-Christ*, he tells us: "The priest knows as well as anyone that there is no longer any 'God'" (Nietzsche 1968, 150).

For Nietzsche, the death of (belief in) God marks a pivotal point in western intellectual and spiritual history. It is the culmination of a valuing of truth that according to Nietzsche itself had emerged from the Christian ethic. In fact, this Christian inspired "will to truth" itself ultimately undermined belief in God.

> One can see *what* it was that actually triumphed over the Christian god: Christian morality itself, the concept of truthfulness that was taken ever more rigorously; the father confessor's refinement of the Christian conscience, translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price. (Nietzsche 2001, 219)

Nietzsche believed that it was the valuing of truth itself – a central virtue in Christian morality – which ultimately led the society shaped by this ethic to reject the idea of God due to its falseness. He focuses on a different aspect of this development in his essay "What is religious" in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> Finally, what remained to be sacrificed? At long last, did not one have to sacrifice for once whatever is comforting, holy, healing; all hope, all faith in hidden harmony, in future blisses and justices? didn't one have to sacrifice God himself. (Nietzsche 1989, 67)

The death of God or belief in God was not simply the result of intellectual enlightenment, according to Nietzsche. He sees it as part of the evolution or development of human spirit – at least in western societies. Hegel, too, saw

"spirit" as that which developed in the form of culture. As we saw in the previous discussion of Kierkegaard, Hegel's story of spirit sees religious belief as coming into conformity with post-Enlightenment philosophical belief. This reconciliation of religion and philosophy according to Nietzsche was dishonest and delayed the eventual victory of atheism. It is this dishonesty that was at the heart of Schopenhauer's opposition to and dislike for Hegel.

> [T]he decline of the faith in the Christian god – the triumph of scientific atheism – is a pan-European event in which all races had their share and for which all deserve credit and honour. Conversely, one might charge the Germans – those Germans who were contemporaries of Schopenhauer – with having *delayed* this triumph of atheism most dangerously for the longest time. Hegel in particular was a delayer par excellence, in accordance with his grandiose attempt to persuade us of the divinity of existence. (Nietzsche 2001, 218–19)

Nietzsche's own interest in atheism was not primarily as an intellectual position. That is to say he was not concerned with proving atheism to be true or religion to be false. He assumed that this was so and that the prominent trends in western spiritual and intellectual development reflected this state of affairs. Nietzsche was interested in how this "event" would gradually change western values and morality. He saw belief in God and Christian morality in general as holding back those who have the potential to achieve higher spiritual and intellectual lives. He viewed the Europe of his time as still largely under the influence of Christian values, but he also saw the stirrings of change. He recognized that it would take time for the new beliefs and values to seem less strange, to feel less strange, even among the spiritually advanced. It would take even longer for the beliefs of the general population to catch up to those who saw things more clearly. He recognized the obstacles to this change (the "delayers" such as Hegel and the lying priests). But he was optimistic that this time would come, and he was excited about the possibility of creating what he saw as new, positive values in opposition to those which were "life-denying."

Twentieth-Century Existentialism

It is in the century following Kierkegaard and Nietzsche that we see the emergence of existentialism proper, although as I mentioned in the introduction, certain other *existential* thinkers of this century were also associated with the movement. Sartre's "Existentialism is a humanism" puts forth

a clear statement of "existential atheism," a term he applies not only to himself, but to Heidegger and the "French existentialists." He uses this designation to distinguish his form of existentialism from that of Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel – both of whom were Christian. Sartre claimed that these diverse thinkers shared the view that existence precedes essence (a disputable claim, as Webber's distinction suggests), but he thought that atheistic existentialism was more consistent on this point. He tells us: "Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it" (Sartre 1946 [1956], 290).

Christian existentialism aside, it is not clear that Heidegger fits into the category of "atheistic existentialism" either.[1] In his "Letter on humanism" he contrasts "existence" understood in terms of *existentia* with his own notion of *ek-sistence*.

> Sartre expresses the basic tenet of existentialism in this way: Existence precedes essence. In this statement he is taking *existentia* and *essentia* according to their metaphysical meaning, which from Plato's time on has said that *essentia* precedes *existentia*. Sartre reverses this statement. But the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement . . . Sartre's key proposition about the priority of *existentia* over *essentia* does . . . justify using the name "existentialism" as an appropriate title for a philosophy of this sort. But the basic tenet of "existentialism" has nothing at all in common with the statement from *Being and Time* – apart from the fact that in *Being and Time* no statement about the relation of *essentia* and *existentia* can yet be expressed. (Heidegger 1947 [1977], 208–9)

To which statement from *Being and Time* is Heidegger referring? He indicates this earlier in the "letter." "The 'essence' of *Dasein* lies in its existence" (Heidegger 1927, 42; Heidegger 1947 [1977], 209). He makes it clear here that he is not referring to the opposition between *essentia* and *existentia* as in Sartre's case or even in Plato's usage. He is not concerned here with human actuality and possibility but rather with ek-sistence, which for Heidegger is concerned with *how* humans exist in the world rather than *what* they consist of. Human beings experience existence *ecstatically* or outside of themselves.

1 Even though Sartre places Heidegger in the category of "existential atheists," the paragraph in which he discusses this suggests that he intends to include him among the "atheistic existentialists." His attribution to Heidegger of the belief that "existence precedes essence" would seem to confirm this.

A second potentially misleading claim that Sartre makes in reference to Heidegger also comes in the essay "Existentialism is a humanism," when he makes reference to the notion of abandonment. "And when we speak of 'abandonment' – a favorite word of Heidegger – we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end" (Sartre 1946 [1956], 294).

It is not clear here that Sartre is attributing to Heidegger the idea that abandonment entails God's non-existence but in the context of this essay it could easily be understood in this way. Heidegger's own notion of abandonment and "homelessness" is less clear and even seems somewhat *agnostic* regarding the existence of a deity. For him, abandonment indicates something that he sees as more fundamental or primordial about human existence, whether conceived of in theological or secular terms. Heidegger, consistent with romanticism, idealism, and Marxism, sees this as indicating *estrangement* or *alienation* and this fundamental situation of humankind exists independently of God's existence or non-existence (Heidegger 1947 [1977], 218–19).

The true atheism of existentialism comes to the fore in the work of Sartre and Beauvoir. We see this early on in Sartre's essay referred to above. There, Sartre's characterization of existentialism is fundamentally atheistic. It is so because the phrase "existence precedes essence" is meant as an inversion of the previous view that saw God or the Platonic forms as providing an essence that preceded existence. Sartre's emphasis on human freedom and the ability of people to choose who they will be has sometimes been thought to imply that freedom trumps biology or nature. Some of Sartre's more radical-sounding claims in *Being and Nothingness* lend some plausibility to such claims. But I think that "existence precedes essence" is best understood as signaling his opposition to theism or other views that see humanity as endowed with a pre-given essence, soul, or self. Sartre acknowledges that human *transcendence* or *freedom* is constrained in certain ways by what he calls our *facticity* – a term that encompasses our social, political, and biological situation. He acknowledges this already in *Being and Nothingness*. And though he never abandons a central place for freedom in his philosophy, his later work, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, published in 1960, acknowledges more strongly the effects of social and material conditions on one's capacity for choice.

Sartre's aim in "Existentialism is a humanism" – besides clarifying what the term existentialism means – is to show both *that* it is an ethical philosophy,

and to tell us *what* the ethical implications are of this view. The belief that "existence precedes essence" and the accompanying belief that God does not exist implies that human beings are responsible for the values they choose to live by. Not only does Sartre not accept the idea that existentialism implies nihilism or amoralism, he suggests that the problem of morality becomes all the more serious in the absence of God. For without God, without a divine legislator, human beings themselves must be responsible for how they live. Arguably, morality itself only becomes possible in the absence of such a divine source of law. How one behaves in the absence of such dictates says much about one's character. We think it appropriate that children behave according to the values and rules of their parents or teachers. But we also expect that there will come a time when they have matured sufficiently so that they can more or less choose their own values or, more precisely, choose which existing values they will live by. There is a sense in which they only really act morally once they realize the significance of their choices and actions. In light of this realization, a person acts responsibly. Likewise, humankind, when it has moved beyond the idea of God as legislator, experiences authentic morality for the first time. It is this authenticity, premised as it is on our capacity for choice, which is central to existentialist morality.

Sartre says something interesting about the type of atheism that he associates with existentialism at the end of this essay. Having already discussed the implications of God's absence for our understanding of morality, he tells us: "Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view" (Sartre 1946 [1956], 311). This is a bit puzzling, given the amount of time Sartre has spent previously in this essay drawing out the consequences of the loss of belief in God and arguing for the logical compatibility and consistency between this state of belief and existentialism. So, in what sense would God's existence make no difference to existentialism? I can only speculate here and suggest that either Sartre is simply being inconsistent, or what he means to emphasize is that the subjective situation of each individual human being remains the same whether or not God exists. That is to say, one must face the question of what values to live by or what kind of life to choose on one's own. This includes whether or not to believe in God. Just as children reach a point where they must choose how to live independent of their parents' values – even though their parents may still be alive and may play some part in

their lives – so human beings must reach a point where they authentically choose how they will live. One could argue – in the spirit of Nietzsche – that even Christianity itself demands that one's belief in God not be coerced or unthinking, but rather be based on one's genuine and mature assent. Whatever potential beliefs or values human beings are faced with, according to Sartre, requires a response that engages the individual's subjectivity. We see some support for this interpretation when he goes on to say: "Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God" (Sartre 1946 [1956], 311).

It is in Sartre's major work *Being and Nothingness* that we see a novel exposition of his atheism. When I say this, I do not mean to imply that the central theme of that work is atheism. It is, as the subtitle reveals to us, *A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. But central to that ontology is a conception of what it is to be a human being. Of course, to be human according to Sartre implies that one's existence precedes one's essence, but one of the implications of this fact is that we exist in a state of *lack*. What is it that we lack? We lack *being* or we lack completion. Desire, according to Sartre, indicates this lack of being. Human beings desire completeness or unity of being according to Sartre. But the completeness that we desire is not the same as the completeness that we attribute to objects. The being of objects or being-in-itself is characterized as that which "is what it is" (Sartre 1956, 28). Objects are complete in themselves and need not refer beyond themselves for their being. Being-for-itself or the being of consciousness, on the other hand, is being that "is what it is not, and is not what it is" (Sartre 1956, 113). This rather confusing sounding phrase implies that being-for-itself is being that is in the process of *becoming* and will never be what it is in the sense of being a complete or unified entity. At the same time, consciousness "is what it is not" in the sense that it projects itself into the future toward its possibilities or toward an image it has of itself as a complete being. Sartre illustrates this with the following colorful account:

> If I may use a down-to-earth image for the sake of making my thought clearer, picture an ass drawing behind him a cart. He attempts to get hold of a carrot which has been fastened at the end of a stick which in turn has been tied to the shaft of the cart. Every effort on the part of the ass to seize the carrot results in advancing the whole apparatus and the cart itself, which always remains at the same distance from the ass. Thus we run after a possible which our very running causes to appear, which is nothing but

> our running itself, and which thereby is by definition out of reach. We run toward ourselves and we are – due to this very fact – the being which can not be reunited with itself. (Sartre 1956, 277–8)

It is this fissure in being or this lack of self-identity that gives rise to the desire *to be* according to Sartre. Although the goal is out of reach, it is the striving toward it that defines human being and gives meaning to life.

But Sartre also recognizes another aspect of this desire to be. The desire to be complete (like an object) *and yet* to remain free or to retain an experience of transcendence (like a subject or consciousness) he characterizes as the desire to exist as being-in-itself-for-itself. Such being corresponds to the traditional Judeo-Christian conception of God. In her "Translator's Introduction" to *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel Barnes tells us that the concept of God that Sartre has in mind seems to be that of the Scholastics. We understand God as a being who is complete and self-sufficient and to whom we attribute the characteristics of omnipotence, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, and so on. But on the other hand, we regard God as a being who is free and who transcends existence or transcends the totality. But the idea of a being who is both free and complete or whose subjectivity and objectivity exist in unity is a contradictory one according to Sartre.

Sartre gives us a kind of ontological argument for God's non-existence. The classic versions of the ontological argument given by St. Anselm and René Descartes attempt to demonstrate God's existence from the concept of God itself. Existence itself is a necessary attribute of a *perfect* being (Descartes) or a being of which *none greater* can be thought (St. Anselm). Sartre turns the ontological approach to demonstrating God's existence on its head in a sense by showing the impossible idea implied in such a concept. The concept of God is not only problematic, but the contradiction implied in the very idea ensures its non-existence:

> No consciousness, not even God's, can "see the underside" – that is, apprehend the totality as such. For if God is consciousness, he is integrated in the totality. And if by his nature, he is a being beyond consciousness (that is, an in-itself which would be its own foundation) still the totality can appear to him only as object (in that case he lacks the totality's internal disintegration as the subjective effort to reapprehend the self) or as subject (then since God is not this subject, he can only experience it without knowing it). (Sartre 1956, 400)

But despite the impossibility implied in the concept of God, Sartre thought that the idea still played an important role in human self-understanding. Both

the concept of "God" and the passion of "man" (expressed in the desire to be God) are notions that are logically impossible. Referring to this passion near the end of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre famously says:

> Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the *Ens causa sui*, which religions call God. Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion. (Sartre 1956, 784)

This sounds like a negative assessment of the human situation but, as in the example of the ass pulling the cart, chasing the carrot, Sartre tells us that it is the pursuit itself or "possibility" that gives life meaning (Sartre 1956, 278).

In defining "man" or human being, Sartre invokes God. But his invocation of God, unlike that of Descartes, is not meant to ensure human reality or ensure our knowledge of reality, but rather human reality, and in particular human consciousness, is the starting point for his explanation of the concept of God. Sartre sees the idea of God – in a manner similar to Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophical anthropology – as an idea that expresses the highest perfection or completion of humankind. His concept of the Other plays a key role here. The Other for Sartre is an ontological category rather than a reference to a specific other or others. It is really a structure of selfhood. To be a self or to have an identity is to have one's self-consciousness infused with otherness. He begins with human others as characterized in his discussion of the *look*. The problem of solipsism, according to Sartre, is not resolved by arguments intended to show that other minds exist as potential objects of knowledge. One experiences the reality of others more directly when one experiences the look of another. In the experience of the look, one becomes conscious of the existence of another consciousness that sees one as an object in the world. One's *being-for-others* is that dimension of one's identity which is part of oneself and yet escapes one's direct experience. Sartre gives several concrete examples of this phenomenon that involves particular experiences of one experiencing the look. Not all experiences of the look rely on the actual presence of another person. The voyeur looking through the keyhole experiences the look in the form of the sound of "footsteps in the hallway" (Sartre 1956, 349) and the soldier in enemy territory experiences the look with the "rustling of branches" or "a light movement of a curtain" in the farmhouse on the hill (Sartre 1956, 346). In other words, the

look of the Other is always with us as a dimension of ourselves. It is our self as others see us. It is an aspect of the self for which we are responsible and yet which we cannot access. When we act or speak, our actions and words are taken up and interpreted by an independent consciousness. This consciousness, this Other, according to Sartre, "knows what I am" (Sartre 1956, 473). If I could internalize this otherness, I could become the foundation of my own being.

In the section of the book called "The existence of others," he discusses Kafka and the sense in which the *truth* of the actions of his characters – Joseph K in *The Trial* and K in *The Castle* – "constantly escape them" (Sartre 1956, 356). Sartre acknowledges that Kafka is making reference to the "transcendence of the divine," which provides the necessary perspective for constituting the truth of these actions. What he says next, however, is key to understanding the role of God in Sartre's ontology. "But God here is only the concept of the Other pushed to the limit" (Sartre 1956, 356). As I mentioned above, the Other is an ontological category for Sartre rather than a reference to actual others. It is in our concrete encounters with other human beings that we experience otherness directly and we become conscious of our self as having an *outside* or an objective dimension. But the concept of God represents that pervasive sense of otherness that Kafka captures in his novels. For Sartre, of course, God as Other is a projection of something that comes to us from concrete experience. The idea of God plays a role in constituting our identity. Our complete identity implies a unification or synthesis of both the inside and outside perspective. But, of course, such a synthesis is impossible.

Sartre's long-time romantic partner, friend, and colleague, Simone de Beauvoir also embraced the idea that "existence precedes essence," as well as the accompanying label *existentialist*. She too recognized the project expressed in the desire to be God. It is this fundamental desire that moves human beings toward the spirit of *seriousness*. The situation of the serious *man*, according to Beauvoir, is that he takes values to be solid like objects rather than being manifestations of one's own choices. In this sense, the serious man remains in a child-like state (Beauvoir 1948, 47). Indeed, what Beauvoir calls our "ambiguous situation" has its roots in childhood. The child lives in a serious world in the sense that "in his eyes, human inventions, words, customs, and values are given facts, as inevitable as the sky and the trees" (Beauvoir 1948, 35). When the solidity of the values given to him by adults begins to crumble, the child's situation becomes ambiguous. On the one hand he is attracted by his freedom to choose values, but on the other hand he experiences anxiety over the responsibility

implied by such freedom. He is tempted to escape such responsibility and retreat to the world of ready-made values in a display of what Sartre labeled "bad faith." Indeed, the desire to be God or to overcome one's incomplete nature is the ultimate expression of bad faith. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir presents us with a hierarchy of men in which each type of man sits on a spectrum between being unfree or inauthentic and being truly free or authentic. The serious man sits near the bottom, just above what she calls the "subman." Each of these types – the subman, the serious man, the nihilist, the adventurer, and the passionate man – display differing forms of bad faith. Each of these types expresses a fundamental "fear in the face of existence" (Beauvoir 1948, 45). But it is possible for a conversion to take place whereby one becomes truly free. "The individual will then find his joy in the very wrench which separates him from the being of which he makes himself a lack" (Beauvoir 1948, 66).

In her work, Beauvoir emphasized a different aspect of the inevitable failure of the desire to be. "Beauvoir embraces the failure of this desire ... our vain attempt to be God makes us human. It is also a source of joy" (Bergoffen 2002, 409). It is in letting go, not only of the belief in God and the ready-made values that come along with such belief, but of the project of turning our freedom into a thing, that we embrace our humanity in all its ambiguity. It is in living this ambiguous freedom that we overcome our "fear in the face of existence" and find joy in our own freedom and in supporting that of others.

Albert Camus was a friend of Beauvoir and Sartre, at least until he and the latter had a falling out. Camus did not characterize himself as an existentialist, but he certainly falls into the category of "existential thinker." Camus' own atheism is well expressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. That book, much like the works of Sartre and Beauvoir mentioned previously, is not primarily concerned with disproving God's existence. He takes God's non-existence for granted and explores the implications of this situation. For Camus, it is not simply that God does not exist, but more generally the fact that the universe is devoid of meaning, which defines the human condition. The confrontation of "the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 1975, 32) with the "human need" for meaning or for "unity" is what constitutes the phenomenon that Camus calls "the absurd."

The question that he focuses on in this book emerges from the absurd condition of humankind. Given that we desire meaning and the fact that the universe refuses to give it (is devoid of it), does suicide follow as a practical response? Camus is quite clear that it does not. He, like his existentialist friends, rejects the path of bad faith. He thinks that humankind has sheltered

itself from the indifference and terror of the world by building up layers of meaning over the millennia which have turned "the primitive hostility of the world" (Camus 1975, 20) into something familiar, something more human. Living authentically for Camus requires both a "revolt" against the absurd and "lucidity" of thought in the face of it. Such lucidity aims at having us see the world as it really is in some sense – devoid of the meanings we have attributed to it and the constructions with which we have clothed it. Living *without appeal* or without meaning is Camus' prescription. Just as Camus' Sisyphus defies the gods by performing his absurd task with joy, so too are we to live.

Existentialism and Atheism in the Twenty-First Century

Existentialism as a philosophical and cultural movement lost much of its prominence during the latter part of the twentieth century. Many of those whose sympathies lay in this tradition embraced postmodern deconstruction, hermeneutics, or existentialism's long-time philosophical partner phenomenology. Does this mean that existentialism has nothing more to say to us in general or in relation to atheism in particular? I don't think that this is the case.

Apart from the continuing historical and scholarly work that is being performed by academics interested in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, Marcel, Jaspers, and other existential thinkers, there continue to be innovative applications of many of the ideas that they put forth. Whether it be work on *selfhood* such as we see in Dan Zahavi's writings on Sartre and Heidegger, *personal identity* as articulated in Patrick Stokes' research on Kierkegaard, an examination of the concept of *character* in Sartre's work by Jonathan Webber, or discussions of *feminism* and *gender* in Deborah Bergoffen's account of Beauvoir, the original sources of existential thought continue to be a rich resource for philosophical reflection. But perhaps the most important ongoing contribution that existential philosophers in general and existentialists in particular have made is to the way that the individual approaches questions regarding the existence of God, meaning in life, individual purpose, and so on. Year after year, as I witness students encountering existential thought for the first time I see something come alive in them. I read it in their papers and I hear it in their voices when we discuss the various themes. They recognize their own situation in the works of these philosophers and writers. They realize that even though they

have been shaped by historical, social, religious, and biological factors, that their own comprehension of ideas, their own sense of meaning, and ultimately their own assent to beliefs is something inherently personal. The degree to which one *does* recognize this fact and perhaps even the degree to which an individual *is capable* of seeing it may vary, but the idea that one must take responsibility for what they believe and how they live is one that still resonates with many people.

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35

Atheism and Postmodern Philosophies

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'Postmodernism' was once very much in vogue, although it has recently experienced something of an eclipse. This is true in the field of philosophy, as in various other fields, including literature, art, music, architecture, and theology. Initially emerging as a recognized term in the late 1970s, postmodernism became especially prominent in the 1980s, 1990s, and into the new millennium. But although postmodernism in philosophy has given way to various other movements, including new materialism, speculative realism, 'new Hegelianism', and revivified forms of Platonism, to name but a few, these new philosophies would have been inconceivable without the postmodernism out of which they emerged. Furthermore, many of what were once the most controversial claims of postmodernism have now been largely accepted and taken as commonplace. In this sense, postmodernism continues to cast long shadows, even at a time when its own name is rarely invoked. The question of its relationship to atheism is a fascinating and ambivalent one, with some seeing postmodernism as inherently atheistic, and others regarding it as undermining and destabilizing all atheistic claims. This chapter seeks to illuminate and explain the nature of this complex relationship. But before doing so, we must first give some consideration to the question of what 'postmodern philosophies' are commonly taken to be.

The question of what constitutes postmodern philosophies is not an easy one to answer. For one thing, the term was not generally claimed by those philosophers who were designated by others as 'postmodern'. Jacques Derrida, for instance, is widely thought to be emblematic of postmodern philosophy, but he himself rarely used the term and, indeed, deliberately avoided it, thinking it to be often more misleading than clarifying. The term was therefore coined by some thinkers to label the thought of others, and was not generally adopted as a term of self-identification, at least not until it was adopted by a second generation of self-proclaimed postmodern philosophers

some decades later. A second difficulty arises from the fact that the currency of the term was not chronologically coterminous with the philosophy that it designated. The term first started being used philosophically in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and yet what were regarded as some of the 'founding' texts of postmodern philosophy – Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference* and Emmanuel Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* – were published in 1967 and 1961, respectively (Levinas 1969; Derrida 1978). Furthermore, Levinas had been writing books since the 1930s, and other thinkers often described as 'postmodern' (such as Georges Bataille and Jacques Lacan) were likewise active from the 1920s and 1930s.

So what, if anything, was the term thought to designate? Given the diversity of philosophers and positions that have been embraced by the umbrella term of 'postmodernism', we should not realistically expect the term to demarcate anything more than fairly broad 'family resemblances'. The term itself gives some clue as to the most salient of these 'family resemblances'. What the word suggests, above all, is an ambivalent relationship to the modern, modernism, or modernity. On the one hand, the prefix 'post' is suggestive of a radical break or a rupture with the modern. The word seems to designate something new, something that moves decisively beyond the modern. On the other hand, the same prefix 'post' is simultaneously suggestive of a continuing indebtedness to or continuity with the modern. The very fact that 'postmodern' is, as a term, parasitic in relation to the word 'modern' seems to suggest that the form of thought being demarcated is likewise parasitic and in some sense dependent on the 'modern'. What this means, therefore, is that there is *both* a rupture *and* a continuity between postmodern philosophies and the modern philosophies that preceded them. But in what precisely do this rupture and this continuity consist?

The first systematic attempt to articulate the defining features of postmodern philosophy and their relationship to modernity was undertaken by Jean-François Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, first published in French in 1979 (Lyotard 1984). The work was as much sociological and phenomenological as it was philosophical, as it sought to make sense of a discerned change in the structures, conditions, and criteria of knowledge in the western world as they had evolved in the late twentieth century. In other words, Lyotard was concerned less with advancing a particular philosophical argument about the nature of knowledge than with describing and articulating philosophically changes that had occurred and were occurring in the understanding of knowledge and truth in western society at large. Lyotard employed the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' in

order more clearly to articulate the nature of this shift. Contrary to understandings of the 'modern' as that which is 'contemporary', 'present', and 'up to date', Lyotard understood the 'modern' as a particular 'tradition' or 'mode of thought': 'modernity is not an era in thought but rather a mode (this is the Latin origin of the word) of thought, of utterances of sensibility' (Lyotard 1989, 314). This sensibility or way of thinking had its own distinctive features and criteria for truth and knowledge, and held sway in Europe and the western world from around the sixteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. Lyotard identifies two features in particular of this modern philosophical sensibility that began to subside in the mid-twentieth century.

The first was that modernity was marked by the epistemological sovereignty of reason and science. This meant that reason and science played a legitimizing function in relation to knowledge and truth. Truth claims were legitimate in so far as they could be justified by rational and/or scientific means, and in this sense scientific rationality served as the *foundation* for knowledge and truth in general. Lyotard suggests, however, that this is no longer the case. He says that there has been 'an internal erosion of the legitimacy principle of knowledge. There is erosion at work inside the speculative game, and by loosening the weave of the encyclopedic net in which each science was to find its place, it eventually sets them free' (Lyotard 1984, 39). The transition from a modern to a postmodern economy of knowledge is marked by a transition from a scientific to a *narrative* mode of knowledge. The narratives through which we understand ourselves, each other, and our world no longer need to be legitimized by science or by a neutral form of reason; on the contrary, 'they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do' (Lyotard 1984, 23). There are various explanations as to why some narratives are preferred over others, why some narratives 'work' and others are discarded, but these explanations are no longer constituted by the 'foundations' provided by neutral reason or empirical science as they were in modernity.

The second distinguishing feature of modernity was the credence that it gave to what Lyotard calls the 'meta-narrative' or 'grand narrative'. A meta-narrative is an overarching, all-encompassing narrative that exceeds and includes all other smaller narratives within it; it is precisely a narrative 'with a legitimating function' (Lyotard 1992, 19). A meta-narrative posits a founding 'beginning' and a teleological 'end', and all that takes place in between is understood and made intelligible precisely by this beginning and this end. A meta-narrative allows for a multiplicity of narratives to function

within and beneath it, but they are themselves legitimized, organized, and get their ultimate sense from the meta-narrative that encompasses them. It should be noted that the credence given to meta-narratives is not a feature solely of modernity. As Lyotard himself observes, the grand narrative scheme of Christian redemption functions precisely as a meta-narrative, and this is clearly pre-modern rather than modern (Lyotard 1992, 17–18). The advent of modernity around the sixteenth century and following was marked not by the demise of the meta-narrative, but rather by the displacement of one meta-narrative by others. The meta-narrative of Christianity was displaced by the meta-narratives of secular reason or Enlightenment emancipation or Marxist liberation, all of which are quintessentially modern meta-narratives. For Lyotard, the movement from a modern to a postmodern economy of knowledge is marked precisely by the *demise* of the meta-narrative, in the sense that people no longer believe in them: 'The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation' (Lyotard 1984, 37). The old 'grand' narratives – whatever their contents – are no longer thought to be credible. Christianity, secular reason, liberalism, and Marxism have declined not because of any deficiencies in their specific claims or the contents of their narratives, but precisely because they are meta-narratives. They make overarching claims about where we have come from and where we are going; they aspire to a 'God's eye' view that people no longer believe to be credible. Lyotard says that people are now happy to live without absolute beginnings and ends, without overarching explanations, and to live instead within the 'here and now', to make do with forms of knowledge that are constituted by *petit récits*, or 'little narratives': 'the little narrative [*petit récit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science' (Lyotard 1984, 60).

While Lyotard has much more to say about what he takes to constitute the 'postmodern condition', these two features do much to illuminate what he takes to be the transition from a modern to a postmodern sensibility. Likewise, while by no means coming close to capturing the formidable complexity and heterogeneous stances of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, or Michel Foucault, these two features might be seen as constituting the 'family resemblances' that are common to their work. What these (and other) thinkers share in common is a scepticism towards or rejection of scientific or rational *foundationalism* in philosophy, and the inescapable role of narratives in the constitution of knowledge. They are all likewise sceptical about or deny the

possibility of any overarching meta-narrative that would constitute the unquestioned horizon for all thought and knowledge. In this sense, we might say that Lyotard has not only identified the most salient features of knowledge in a postmodern society, but also the most prominent 'family resemblances' shared by postmodern philosophers.

What is also interesting to note is that these two features of the postmodern condition could be regarded as enactments of the central insights of two philosophers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The first feature, namely the decline of foundationalism and the move towards a narrative mode of knowledge, might be seen as an enactment of Wittgenstein's understanding of language games. Wittgenstein wanted to do justice to that which he thought philosophy had neglected, namely the multiplicity and heterogeneity of our linguistic practices, forms of life or language games. As he says: 'There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten' (Wittgenstein 1958, 23:11). These language games each have their own rules, customs, and conventions, and yet modern philosophy had too often downplayed or smoothed over these differences by subordinating them to the rules, customs, and conventions of one particular form of life or language game. In modernity, this privileged language game was that of secular reason, empirical science, or a blend of the two. This then served as the privileged foundation, the criteria for meaning and truth, to which all other language games had to be subordinated, and in relation to which they had to justify themselves.

For Wittgenstein, this was not only philosophically arbitrary, but also distorting, as these language games then had to render themselves through categories and criteria of meaning that were alien to them. The result could only be confusion and distortion, and Wittgenstein saw the task of philosophy as being to rescue us from such distortion. The task of philosophy therefore became that of conceptual clarification, that is to say, one of passive description rather than one of active intervention. As he puts it,

> We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place . . . Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language . . . Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is.
>
> (Wittgenstein 1958, 109:47; 124:49)

This basic Wittgensteinian insight is one that is broadly shared by those considered to be postmodern philosophers, and therefore has a good claim to being one of the 'family resemblances' that they share in common. Postmodern philosophers generally embrace the end of foundationalism, the end of the epistemological sovereignty of scientific rationality, and the primacy of the narrative mode.

The second feature, namely the end of the 'meta-narrative', might be seen as a practical enactment of Nietzsche's understanding of the 'death of God'. It is well known that Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God through the person of the 'madman' in *The Gay Science* (1882) was not simply a confession of disbelief in God. More significantly, Nietzsche was concerned to show how modern society had 'killed' God but had not yet realized and comprehended the significance of what it had done. As the madman says, 'this tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering – it has not yet reached the ears of man . . . This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars – *and yet they have done it themselves*' (Nietzsche 1976, 95). Nietzsche was primarily concerned with the *ramifications* of the death of God, and it is clear that he considered these ramifications to be revolutionary. In the words of the madman, 'All of us are [God's] murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun?' (Nietzsche 1976, 95). We shall return to consider the specific character of these ramifications below, but it is clear that Nietzsche thought that the death of God brought with it earth-shattering implications. Until we become self-reflexively aware of these ramifications, we continue to live under what Nietzsche called the 'shadows of the dead God'.

It might be argued that the European transition from the meta-narrative of Christianity to the meta-narrative of secular reason already presaged the death of God. The eclipse of the meta-narrative of Christianity might be seen already as the eclipse of God. And yet that God was slow to die, and in so far as that God was dead, he continued to cast his shadows. Not only did belief in God remain persistent, but confidence in meta-narratives (whether of secular reason, Enlightenment emancipation, or Marxist liberation) survived for another several hundred years. But the persistence of (non-Christian) meta-narratives might itself be seen as a ghostly shadow of the dead God *precisely because they were meta-narratives*. In other words, a meta-narrative as such might be regarded as a profoundly theological notion. A meta-narrative, with its absolute beginning and its teleological end, and with its comprehensive, totalizing perspective, is only really possible on the

supposition of a God who would be able to embody, guarantee, and reveal such a perspective. Without a God, one might say, there can be no 'God's eye view'.

And yet confidence in meta-narratives continued for some time after God began to die at the hand of his 'murderers'. Michel de Certeau (like Slavoj Žižek after him) was fond of invoking the image of the cartoon character Felix the Cat who runs off the edge of a cliff, but continues running in a straight line even after the ground has disappeared beneath his feet. He continues running, unsupported, for some time until he finally realizes he is literally walking on air; and it is only then, with that realization, that he finally plunges into the abyss (Certeau 1986, 183).[1] This is an apt metaphor for the persistence of meta-narratives without the God that would serve as their support. In effect, Nietzsche pointed out to humanity that it was walking on air, and it was only then, with that realization, that the meta-narratives finally came crashing down. Lyotard was the philosopher who perceived and proclaimed that this had finally happened.

Postmodern philosophers work and write in the wake of the death of God, and they do so consciously aware that this means the end of meta-narratives. They were perhaps the first philosophers to work in a genuinely and self-consciously post-Nietzschean space. It took some time for Nietzsche to be taken seriously as a philosopher by philosophers. His work was initially largely ignored. Martin Heidegger was one of the first to take it seriously, publishing two volumes on Nietzsche's thought, based on lectures delivered in the 1930s and 1940s (Heidegger 1979–1987). But seriously though he treated it, he interpreted it as the culmination of modern metaphysics, while simultaneously pointing forward to what might come after it. Postmodern philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman, and Gianni Vattimo rejected this interpretation and instead saw Nietzsche as the first genuinely post-metaphysical thinker, understanding themselves to be working out and carrying forward the implications of his work (Derrida 1978; Vattimo 1992, 2006; Kofman 1994). So much so that when discussing Derrida's distinctive philosophical method and practice of deconstruction, the American philosopher Mark C. Taylor said that 'deconstruction is the "hermeneutic" of the death of God' (Taylor 1984, 6). In other words, it was the interpretative putting into practice of the implications of the death of God.

This brings us, at last, to the question of the relationship of these postmodern philosophies to atheism. From what has just been said, it might

1 Certeau invokes this image several times in his writings.

appear that the relationship between postmodern philosophies and atheism is a close one. These philosophers take Nietzsche and his 'death of God' as an assumed backdrop to their own thought, and this was in many ways encapsulated when Derrida, in a much-quoted phrase, said that 'I quite rightly pass for an atheist' (Derrida 1993, 155). Postmodern philosophies, it seems, are inscribed on an unequivocally atheistic page. But what at first seems uncontroversial and self-evident is, in fact, rather more complex and ambivalent. As we look more closely into the relationship between postmodern philosophies and atheism, we find that there is much to say and more to qualify.

For one thing, a great deal is at stake in how we understand and define atheism itself. Looked at historically, there is a strong case to be made that atheism is an inherently *modern* (as opposed to pre-modern or postmodern) outlook and form of thought. This is so not only in the sense that atheism happened to emerge and grow during the modern period, but, more strongly, that atheism is made *possible* and *intelligible* by certain specifically modern epistemological assumptions.[2] In particular, atheism is predicated on a dualistic subject–object epistemology whereby the task of the knowing subject is accurately to reflect, capture, or represent the object (the world 'out there') that it sees before it. This epistemology is often traced back to Descartes, and broadly held sway throughout the modern period. A product of this epistemology, atheism is an objective metaphysical truth claim (made by the knowing subject in relation to objective reality) about the non-existence of God. The knowing subject 'sees' or 'knows', on the basis of rational, empirical, or scientific criteria, that the objective truth of things is that there is no God, that God does not exist. Atheism is, in this sense, deemed to be 'true'. When atheism is framed in this specifically modern, metaphysical, and representational way, we can immediately begin to see how ill at ease it would sit with postmodern philosophies.

For postmodern philosophers question or reject all these various features of modern philosophy. They question the intelligibility of this dualistic subject–object epistemology; they question whether it is possible for a knowing subject to 'represent' reality; they question whether a neutral 'reason' or 'science' could provide the key that would enable one to represent or capture that reality.[3] In all these ways, therefore, postmodern philosophers would question every aspect of the modern foundationalist philosophical paradigm that allowed for the emergence of atheism and made it intelligible.

2 For detailed expositions of this claim, see Hyman, 2006, 27–46; 2010.

3 Many of these criticisms were clearly elaborated by Richard Rorty in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980).

Indeed, these criticisms might well be seen as direct corollaries of Nietzsche's proclamation of the 'death of God', which we have seen to be so formative for postmodern philosophers. As we have noted, Nietzsche was concerned, above all, with the *ramifications* of the death of God, which he believed to be revolutionary, leaving nothing unchanged. He believed that the death of God destabilized the very notion of an 'objective' and 'universal' *reason*; such a reason was only a manifestation of an 'objective' and 'universal' God. So too the notion of an 'objective' and 'universal' *truth* was destabilized by the death of God, given that God was no longer able to guarantee and underpin such a truth. For Nietzsche, the unavoidable conclusion was that truth is an *effect* of the 'will to power'. That is to say, 'truth is a fiction whose fictive status has been forgotten' (Taylor 1986, 15–16). In these various ways, then, we can see why atheism is also destabilized. For atheism claims to be an 'objective' truth based on 'universal' reason, and yet Nietzsche rejects the notion of 'objective' truth and 'universal' reason as being 'shadows of the dead God'. We thus seem to arrive at the apparently paradoxical conclusion that *the death of God renders atheism unstable*. If this is so, we can see why postmodern philosophers might have had difficulty accepting the kind of modern metaphysical atheism we have been describing. Perhaps this is why, in the quotation cited above, Derrida felt the need to qualify his confession of atheism, and to make the claim that he quite rightly 'passes' for an atheist. Indeed, immediately preceding this phrase, he says that 'the constancy of God in my life is called by other names' (Derrida 1993, 155).

What we begin to see emerging, therefore, is a relationship of *ambivalence* between postmodern philosophies and atheism. On the one hand, postmodern philosophies are made possible by and predicated upon Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God. On the other hand, that very proclamation renders atheism problematic, at least if atheism is understood as the objective metaphysical truth claim that modernity has deemed it to be. Indeed, this ambivalence is closely related to the other manifestation of ambivalence noted above, namely that between postmodern philosophies and modernity. If atheism is contingent upon a specifically modern epistemology in the way I have suggested, then it is to be expected that a postmodern ambivalence towards modernity is likely to give rise also to a postmodern ambivalence towards atheism. If postmodernism is simultaneously indebted to and also seeks to move beyond modernity, so too postmodernism is indebted to and also, in some sense, seeks to move beyond atheism. But in what senses precisely? In what specific ways do postmodern philosophers express their

indebtedness to atheism, while also simultaneously seeking to move beyond it?

In what follows, I want to suggest that there are three possible answers to this question, three ways in which postmodern philosophers have positioned themselves in relation to atheism. The first remains within what we might describe as an 'atheistic ambit'. In other words, postmodern philosophers who pursue this path would not claim that they are anything other than atheists, although their postmodern philosophical assumptions would lead them to qualify what they take this atheism to be. Many of the continental postmodern philosophers (Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan) would probably be among those pursuing this path, although they have not necessarily elaborated it explicitly. They would all, I think, happily designate themselves as atheists, even if, as we have seen, Derrida says that he rightly 'passes' for an atheist, Lacan says he is much less sure about the myth of the 'death of God', and almost all of them have found themselves returning to 'religious' questions in one sense or another.

So in what sense do these thinkers remain within an 'atheistic ambit', if they are not atheists in the sense intrinsic to modern metaphysics? One way of answering this question is to ask what atheism might look like in light of the two thinkers who, we have seen, were so prophetic in relation to postmodern philosophy itself, namely, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. For Nietzsche, we have said, the significance of the death of God lay not simply in the denial of the existence of a being called God, but in the inauguration of an entirely new way of thinking and being in the world. After the death of God, one would not be an atheist because reason, science, and logic deem theism to be 'false' and atheism to be 'true'. This is because the death of God overturns the foundationalism of reason, science, and logic, and overturns the notion of 'truth' itself. All truths are now seen to be fictions, projections of humanity's 'will to power', and the question of which fictions or narratives one adopts and lives within is determined by aesthetic, autobiographical, psychological, or pragmatic considerations. It is here that Nietzsche draws close to Wittgenstein, for although his philosophy is very different, Wittgenstein likewise denies the possibility of some universal or neutral vantage point from which narratives or language games could be 'judged'. For Wittgenstein, the question of which language games we adopt and live within is not a straightforward one, and it is far from clear that we straightforwardly 'choose' or 'decide' on them at all.

The Wittgensteinian philosopher D. Z. Phillips has asked about the implications of this for atheism, and has asked how we might understand and

make sense of atheism in light of this Wittgensteinian or post-foundational philosophical shift. Speaking of such an atheist, Phillips says

> It is not that he sees what it means to say that God exists, but simply does not believe that he does. Rather, he cannot see what it means to say that God exists. He is not saying, 'I happen to believe that God does not exist, but, of course, he might have'. Rather, he is saying that God *cannot* exist, because to talk of 'existence' in this context simply does not mean anything. Atheism, then, denies the *possibility* of believing in God, for to believe that God exists is to try to say what cannot be said. (Phillips 1996, 144)

For such atheists, it is not that philosophy or reason 'shows' or 'demonstrates' or renders it 'probable' that God does not exist. For such Nietzschean or Wittgensteinian philosophers, philosophy and reason are no longer capable of 'demonstrating' any such things. Rather, for whatever aesthetic, autobiographical, psychological, pragmatic, or other reasons, the theistic language game is not one that makes sense to them; it is not one to which they feel 'drawn', it is not one that 'works' for them, it is not one in which they feel able to participate. As a result, they quite rightly 'pass' for atheists. Such postmodern philosophers might not be atheists in the modern and metaphysical sense, but they are atheists nonetheless.

There is, however, a second way in which postmodern philosophies might relate to atheism. We have seen that postmodernism destabilizes both the theism and the atheism that have been bequeathed to us by modernity. In which case, could it be said that the more radical postmodern gesture would be not to espouse either theism or atheism (however much reconfigured or reconceived), but rather to look towards something else altogether? In which case, the postmodern challenge would be to articulate a form of thought that moves *beyond* both theism and atheism. Part of the postmodern critique of modernity is that the latter has evolved totalizing forms of thought that constitute themselves through a whole series of *dualisms*. The whole of thought and experience thus becomes suspended between the poles of these dualisms. These totalizing forms of thought sustain themselves through strategies of *exclusion*; they are able to effect their totalizing function only by excluding that which they cannot contain. By excluding in this way, of course, they cease to be as totalizing as they claim to be. The point of deconstruction was to expose these exclusionary tactics, and thereby to undermine (deconstruct) the totalizing pretensions of these forms of thought themselves. By undertaking these tasks, it was believed that wider vistas would be opened up, and new forms of thought made possible, beyond the

constraints of the dualisms within which modernity is enmeshed and on the basis of which it constitutes itself.

Although these tasks were well under way, being executed by Derrida and his followers in particular, the first to apply them to the specific dualism of theism versus atheism was the American philosopher of religion, Mark C. Taylor. He was among the first to bring French postmodernism to the attention of an Anglophone audience, and to ask what had hitherto been a relatively neglected question: what were the implications of this postmodern deconstruction for theism and atheism? In one of his works, Taylor asked:

> What does the alternative of transcendence and immanence leave out? Is there a nondialectical third that lies between the dialectic of either/or and both/and? Might this third be neither transcendent nor immanent? Does this neither/nor open the time-space of a different difference and another other – a difference and an other that do not merely invert but actually subvert the polarities of Western theological reflection? To begin to respond to such questions, we must try to think the unthought and perhaps unthinkable difference, which I name with the improper name 'altarity,' by rethinking the death of God. (Taylor 1998, 261)

For Taylor, therefore, postmodern philosophy can lead also to a postmodern theology or, more accurately, what Taylor designates an 'a/theology'. He explores at length what he means by this in his book *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (1984). This a/theology neither assumes an ontology of theism (theology), nor does it assume an ontology of atheism (atheology). The significance of the slash (/) is that it demarcates the point of undecidability between theism and atheism. This point of undecidability is not one of paralysing indecision; rather, it opens up a space for creative and experimental thinking *beyond* the binary dualism of theism and atheism. For Taylor, this was indeed to explicate more faithfully the radical consequences of Nietzsche's death of God. It would not be sufficient simply to *negate* theism by affirming atheism. This would be to remain enmeshed within the dualisms of modern metaphysics from which the death of God was meant to bring liberation. In this sense, simply affirming atheism is not sufficiently radical; it would entail remaining under the shadows of the dead God. Taylor quotes J. Hillis Miller, who says: 'To put a minus sign instead of a plus sign before the elements of Western culture is not to liberate oneself from them but to remain entirely bound within their net' (Miller 1979, 354, quoted in Taylor 1984, 10). The postmodern enactment of the death of God is not, therefore, effected simply by negating theism and affirming atheism. What is needed is

something more radical: a creative and innovative attempt to think between and *beyond* theism and atheism. This is what Taylor believes postmodern philosophy is called to pursue.

But there is also a third way in which postmodern philosophies might relate to atheism. When Taylor evokes that which transcends or exceeds the modern dualism between theism and atheism, that which he has sometimes designated as the 'sacred', he is gesturing towards that which precedes and makes possible our world of appearances, defined as it is by dualistic oppositions. Heidegger similarly sought to unveil that which precedes and makes possible our world of appearances, with its distinctions between being and non-being, existence and non-existence, theism and atheism. For Heidegger, our world is not exhausted by the possibilities created by these dualisms and distinctions, although modern thinking tended to forget this. Modernity, indeed, established its hegemony by repressing or excluding that which exceeds its own rational and calculative procedures. So, for instance, conventional thought operates with notions of 'truth' and 'falsehood' that are determined by rational, economic, and empirical criteria. But there is a 'higher' truth (a qualitatively different 'truth') that transcends this conventional distinction between 'truth' and 'falsehood', a higher truth that Heidegger designated by means of the Greek word *aletheia*. This 'higher' truth does not conflict with the mundane conception of truth; rather, this unveiling or *aletheia* is what makes possible the conventional world of being with its distinction between, among other things, truth and falsehood.

The postmodern philosopher Jean-Luc Marion takes these Heideggerian insights and applies them to the dualism between theism and atheism. This dualism was essentially a creation of modernity, and revolved around the question of whether a 'being' called God actually 'exists'. Modernity, in effect, redefined God as a 'being', a 'person', or a 'substance' whose existence or non-existence had to be determined by modern philosophy. Those who affirmed his existence were theists, while those who denied his existence were atheists. But postmodern philosophy, as we have seen, points to something that transcends and exceeds that very distinction. Marion's twist is to read that transcendence in terms of the resources provided by premodern theology, particularly Aquinas. In other words, Marion thought Aquinas and other medieval theologians were speaking of a God who transcended (was qualitatively different from) the 'modern' God that was at issue in the debate between theism and atheism. Indeed, he believes that Aquinas would have regarded that 'modern' conception of God as an idol, a concept created by humanity in its own image. Postmodern philosophy

therefore allows us to transcend that idolatrous conception of God at issue in the modern debate between theism and atheism. If that debate defined God as 'a being', postmodern philosophy allows us to reject that God as idolatrous and to speak instead of a God beyond being, or, in the title of one of Marion's books, *God without Being* (1991). This would be a God who precedes, exceeds, and transcends the modern distinction between theism and atheism. We are thereby enabled to recover a more authentic conception of God, witnessed to by pre-modern theologians in particular.

But does this not entail a repudiation of the Nietzschean death of God, which we have seen to be so formative for postmodern philosophy in general? This is certainly not the case for Marion, for whom Nietzsche was as formative an influence as was Heidegger. Far from repudiating Nietzsche's death of God, Marion embraces it, but he regards it as enacting the death of the idolatrous God of modern metaphysics, the God that is at issue in the modern debate between theism and atheism. We might say, therefore, that Marion regards Nietzsche's death of God as a necessary purgative preface. The modern metaphysical God must be declared dead if an opening is to be cleared for the recovery of an authentic theism, a theism not contained or constrained by 'being'. It is only by passing through the portals of Nietzsche's death of God that one is able to make a return to a qualitatively different and more antique form of theism. For Marion, therefore, the significance of postmodern philosophy lies not in its atheism, but in the possibilities that it harbours for the recovery of an orthodox and more authentic form of theism.

What we have seen, then, is that the relationship of postmodern philosophers towards atheism has ranged from a reformulation of atheism itself, to an attempt to think beyond theism and atheism altogether, to a recovery of a theism that lies beyond modern metaphysics. Postmodern philosophy might be atheistic, heterological, or theistic, and the responses of Derrida, Taylor, and Marion between them enact the ambivalent relationship of postmodern philosophers towards atheism. Emerging out of a founding atheistic gesture, postmodern philosophies open up several possible vistas, at least one of which involves subverting that founding atheistic gesture itself.

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36

Ayn Rand and Objectivism

JAMES G. LENNOX

> If I had to choose between faith and reason, I wouldn't consider the choice even conceivable. As a human being, one chooses reason.
>
> *Rand, in Toffler and Rand 1964*

Introduction

In 1965, in response to a letter from a priest who admired her novels and philosophical essays, Ayn Rand characterized her atheism in the following terms: "I am an intransient atheist but not a militant one. This means that I am an uncompromising advocate of reason and that I am fighting *for* reason, not *against* religion" (ARP 097_02A_010_002).[1] As this response makes clear, Ayn Rand wanted to be identified philosophically in terms of the positions *for* which she is advocating rather than in terms of what she is opposing. Her atheism is a consequence of her impassioned defense of reason as the faculty by which human beings reach knowledge and form values. To understand her atheism, then, we need to understand what she means by "reason": "Reason (the faculty which identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses) is man's only means of perceiving reality, his only source of knowledge, his only guide to action, and his basic means of survival" (Rand 1990a, 4).[2]

1 The priest, as it turns out, was a Thomist from Switzerland. In his initial letter, he describes himself as an Aristotelian, and states that "God certainly has nothing to do with religion" (ARP 097_02A_009_001), and (in a follow-up letter) that the term "religion" covered up "a lot of crooked thinking, of dishonesty and injustice" (ARP 097_02A_011_001).

2 From "Introducing Objectivism," originally published in 1962 in the *Los Angeles Times* as the first in a series known as *The Ayn Rand Column*, and reprinted in Rand (1990a). The entire series is reprinted in Schwartz (1991). I will return later to her specific understanding of "reason."

Unlike those rationalists in the history of philosophy – from Plato, through Augustine and Descartes, to modern idealists – who define reason in *opposition* to perception, Rand stands in the Aristotelian tradition, according to which reason is based on perception and forms concepts inductively, from the materials provided by the senses, allowing human beings "to identify and integrate an unlimited amount of knowledge, a knowledge extending beyond the immediate concretes of any given, immediate moment" (Rand 1970, 19). In the above quote, she stresses that reason is both our only means of knowing and *our only guide to action*. Human beings come *neither* with *a priori* knowledge of the natural world, *nor* with an inborn set of rules about *how to survive and flourish* in that world. Reason provides us with the means both to understand the world abstractly and to "evaluate the facts, thus prescribing a choice of values and a course of action" (Rand 1970, 21). Moreover, these two roles are, in Rand's view, intimately related: "Ethics, the normative science, is based on two cognitive branches of philosophy: metaphysics and epistemology. To prescribe what man ought to do, one must first know *what* he is and *where* he is – i.e. what is his nature (including his means of cognition) and the nature of the universe in which he acts." (Rand 1970, 21)

As should be clear from these passages, when Rand refers to reason as our means of being aware of reality and as our only source of knowledge, she is referring to the world in which we live. To live according to reason means accepting that reality is what it is independent of our consciousness – the metaphysical stance she refers to as the "primacy of existence."[3]

Rand recognized, of course, that religion[4] claims to provide believers with ready-made answers to these extremely important philosophical questions. This explains religion's continuous hold over people's spiritual lives:

> Faith, as such, is extremely detrimental to human life: It is the negation of reason. But you must remember that religion is an early form of philosophy, that the first attempts to explain the universe, to give a coherent frame of reference to man's life and a code of moral values, were made by religion,

3 On Rand's distinction between a primacy of consciousness and primacy of existence metaphysics, see Rand (1982, 28–41) and Rheins (2016, esp. 258–65); and on her epistemological differences from both the rationalist and empiricist traditions, see Rand (1961, 27) and Salmieri (2016b, 277–9).

4 For the purposes of this chapter, when I use the term "religion" I am referring to the religious traditions with which Ayn Rand was most familiar. While she was raised in a secular Jewish household in Russia, during her philosophically and artistically active years she paid especially careful attention to Christianity. See "Requiem for man," her commentary on *Populorum Progresso* (Rand 1967 [2005], 340–66), and "On living death," her commentary on *Humanae Vitae*, two encyclicals of Pope Paul VI (Rand 1990a, 46–53). As we will see, however, she will occasionally use the term "religion" to refer to her own sense of reverence for mankind at his best.

> before men graduated or developed enough to have philosophy.
>
> (Rand, in Toffler and Rand 1964, 10)[5]

Religion, while allegedly offering answers to these questions, demands that human beings abandon the use of reason in seeking answers, and instead accept *its* answers on faith. Rand considered it the central task, not of religion but of philosophy, to provide proper answers to these questions – answers grounded in reason rather than faith (Rand 1984, 1–13).

More than thirty years prior to replying to her priest admirer, on 9 April 1934, as she was nearing completion of her first novel, *We the Living*, Rand began keeping notes in a notebook devoted to philosophical questions. The first entry opens with the words, "I want to be known as the greatest champion of reason and the greatest enemy of religion" (ARP 166_04x_001_004; Harriman 1997, 68). And her atheism goes back much further. Born Alisa Rosenbaum in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1905, by the age of nine she was already determined to be a writer, and at the age of twelve began keeping a journal. In interviews conducted much later in life, she recalled vividly a journal entry, written when she was thirteen, that began, "Today I decided to be an atheist" and in the interview she recalls the basis for her decision:

> I had decided that the concept of God is degrading to man. . . . I had decided [that] since they say that God is perfect and men can never be *that* perfect, the idea necessarily makes men low and imperfect and places something above him, which is totally wrong and untenable and I don't know of any proof. Nobody has ever told me why God exists and nobody *can* tell me. It is obviously an invention, and since it's rationally untenable and degrading to man, I am against it. It was all decided in one day.
>
> (Ayn Rand Biographical Interviews, 1960–1, 111)

In that 1934 notebook entry, she refers to religion "as the root of all human lying and the only excuse for suffering" and as the institution primarily responsible for encouraging people to think of ideals as otherworldly and unattainable in this life. Much of the entry focuses on the effect of religious upbringing on children – that is, on character formation: "I want to prove that religion breaks a character before it's formed, in childhood, by teaching a child lies before it knows what a lie is, by breaking him of the habit of thinking before he has begun to think, by making him a hypocrite before he knows any other possible attitude toward life" (ARP 166_04x_001_002;

5 She opens her essay "Philosophy and sense of life" with a concrete example of religion doing just that (Rand 1970, 31).

Harriman 1997, 66).[6] That hypocrisy stems from a complete disconnect between a child's natural desire for those things that give him pleasure and joy as a living being and the message of religion that such desires are base and that they should strive to be unselfish and meek and to sacrifice for others.

Though it will be many years before she fully articulates her distinctive form of egoism in *Atlas Shrugged* and "The Objectivist Ethics," one can already see here one key ingredient of her developed views: her identification of self-sacrifice as contrary to human nature, and of the destructive impact on the human spirit of upholding it as a cardinal virtue – so that, when children put their own happiness ahead of concern for others, they are taught to feel guilt and shame for their selfishness and for not living according to this ideal.

These early notes go on to identify another source of her animosity toward religion: its explicit rejection of reason: "Religion is also the first enemy of the ability to think. That ability is not used by men to one tenth of its possibility, yet before they learn to think they are discouraged by being ordered to take things on faith. *Faith is the worst curse of mankind*; it is the exact antithesis and enemy of *thought*" (ARP 166_04x_001_003; Harriman 1997, 68). As we will see, these two threads – religion as the enemy of a properly human idealism and as the enemy of reason – are integrated in Rand's later thought in ways that are not obvious here.

There is one final theme in these notes that becomes an important and distinctive feature of her later thinking about the opposition between reason and faith – the connection between faith and force in cultures in which people's lives are dominated by religion: "*Thought* and *reason* are the only weapons of mankind, and the only possible bond of understanding among men. Anyone who demands that anything be taken *on faith* – or relies on any super-mental, super-logical instinct – denies all reason" (ARP 166_04x_001_003; Harriman 1997, 68).

Since this chapter is about her atheism, it is worth pointing out that in these notes attacking faith and religion, Rand makes no explicit reference to God. It is an attack on religion, on the following grounds:

- as the root of an all-pervasive dishonesty, inculcated in children before they are old enough to recognize it;
- as the source of human beings abandoning reason when deciding upon the ideals and values that should govern their day-to-day living, and

6 Very similar criticisms of religion can be found in notes for a never-completed novel, the working title of which was *The Little Street* (see Harriman 1997, 24–5).

encouraging them to accept beliefs about such matters on faith, "the worst curse of mankind";
- for teaching children ideals that are contrary to their natural (human) desires and that are impossible to live by, and then insisting that they are miserable sinners for not living by them;
- as the enemy of that "bond of understanding" among human beings, encouraging the faithful to turn to force to impose their beliefs on their society's heretics.

To demand that people accept beliefs about the nature of the universe, human nature, and what is of value and importance in their lives, on faith, is to disarm them of their only tool for answering such questions for themselves – and in particular, for determining what code of values they should follow in choosing their life's goals and in deciding the best way to achieve them.

As can be seen from these passages, from early in her career Ayn Rand's views about God, religion, faith, and the morality of altruism were consequences of her uncompromising advocacy of reason and her distinctive understanding of its role in defining and achieving values. In the next two sections, I will first explore her atheism within this wider context; I will then briefly consider her views about religion, faith, and altruism as one aspect of her condemnation of Kant; and finally, highlight the ways in which her views on these topics led to her complete disillusionment with, and rejection of, American conservatism.

One's Highest Value

A theme running through all of Ayn Rand's novels is the importance of holding one's own life as one's highest value and of reason as one's means of understanding reality and choosing one's goals and the actions needed to achieve them. This is a theme concretized in the lives of the heroes in those novels, and is at the core of her distinctive form of ethical egoism. In an interesting passage early in her first novel, *We the Living*, the heroine of that novel, Kira Argounova, insists that a belief in God, at least as such a belief is commonly held, conflicts directly with holding one's life as one's highest value. She asks a friend if he believes in God, and he says he does not. She goes on to explain that she uses this question as a way of exploring the value a person places on his own life:

> Because, you see, God – whatever anyone chooses to call God – is one's highest conception of the highest possible. And whoever places his highest

> conception above his own possibility thinks very little of himself and his life. It is a rare gift, you know, to feel reverence for your own life and to want the best, the greatest, the highest possible, here, now, for your very own. To imagine a heaven and then not to dream of it, but to demand it.
>
> (Rand 1936 [1959], 97–8)[7]

Rand came to realize that the appropriate language for conveying the passion and emotional intensity of her heroes' dedication to their lives and their work – words such as "reverence" in the above passage – had been co-opted by religion.[8] And not only had the language been co-opted – it had been *subverted*, misdirecting such emotions toward ideals "outside of this earth and beyond man's reach." She sought both to give full recognition to such emotions, and to rescue them from such subversion: "such concepts do name actual emotions, even though no supernatural dimension exists; and these emotions are experienced as uplifting and ennobling, without the self-abasement required by religious definitions. What, then, is their source or referent in reality? It is the entire emotional realm of man's dedication to a moral ideal" (Rand 1968, ix).This quote is from an introduction penned for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of her second novel, *The Fountainhead*. In it she identifies the sense of life dramatized in *The Fountainhead* as "man worship." Those with this sense of life "see man's highest potential and strive to actualize it" (xii). In this introduction she referred to a quotation from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, that, despite their fundamental philosophical differences, perfectly captured this sense of life: "The noble soul has reverence for itself."[9]

Rand elaborated on this sense of life in her reply to a 1944 letter from Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright's architectural principles and fierce independence had served as an inspiration for the hero of *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark, and

7 For further insight into this passage as it relates to her still-evolving philosophical views, see Ayn Rand Biographical Interviews 1960–1, 157.

8 For an illuminating discussion of this aspect of Rand's thinking see Mayhew (2014). For an insightful account of the development of Rand's thinking about the centrality of the act of valuing in human life, see Salmieri (2016a). Among "new atheists," a number have also challenged religion's monopoly on such concepts. Daniel Dennett, near the conclusion of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, asks: "Is something sacred?" – and answers, "Yes, say I with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. The world is sacred" (Dennett 1995, 520). Similarly, Sam Harris has written *A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* (Harris 2014). Unlike Rand, however, Harris finds spirituality in self-transcendence – indeed, he considers the "self," along with free will, to be a myth.

9 Rand first read Nietzsche as a teenager in Russia. For excellent scholarly discussions of the development of Rand's evaluation of Nietzsche's philosophy, see Hunt (2016), Hicks (2009, 249–91), and Mayhew (2004). Compare the unscholarly treatment in Gray (2018, ch. 2).

he wrote to tell her how much he had enjoyed reading it. In response, she wrote:

> So I would like to tell you now that Howard Roark represents my conception of man as god, of the absolute human ideal. You may not approve of it and it may not be the form in which you see the ideal – but I would like you to accept, as my tribute to you, the fact that what I took from you was taken for the figure of my own god. (Berliner 1995, 113)[10]

To portray the ideal human being is to portray "man as god." But she did not mean by this that the ideal was unattainable. Quite the opposite: What she meant was that a person "who sees man's highest potential and strives to achieve it" should have reverence for *that*, not for an imaginary, supernatural being supposed to exist in a higher dimension of reality. It was lives dedicated to the rational (and *passionate*) pursuit of values which she strove to portray in her novels' heroes.

She did not, however, think this sense of life was only to be found dramatized in fiction. In July 1969, Ayn Rand was one of a number of guests invited by NASA to tour Cape Kennedy and to watch the launch of *Apollo 11*.[11] She reported her experiences and reactions in an article simply entitled "Apollo 11." She describes the intense joy she felt at "watching the embodied concretization of a single faculty of man: his rationality" (Rand 1990a, 168); she feared Neil Armstrong might spoil the moment of mankind's first footsteps on the moon by appealing to religion. However, she reports: "He did not. He made no reference to God; he did not undercut the rationality of his achievement by paying tribute to the forces of its opposite; he spoke of man. 'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.' So it was" (Rand 1990a, 168). In this article, Rand stresses that to see this "demonstration of man's highest potential" provides "the *spiritual fuel* of knowing that man the hero is possible" (Rand 1990a, 171; emphasis added). That religious faith is the wrong place to look for such fuel is a recurring theme in her fiction and her philosophical non-fiction.

"God" as an Invalid Concept

In the previous section, we looked at Ayn Rand's views about the tragic psychological impact of religion and religious faith on the lives of individuals,

10 For a detailed study of the relationship between Wright and Roark, see Berliner (2006).

11 As she makes clear in this article, she did not think it was a proper function of government to sponsor such research, but her focus was on the successful application of reason in accomplishing an enormously difficult technological achievement.

stressing that these views derive from her passionate defense of the indispensable role of reason in human life. I now want to focus more specifically on her atheism – that is, on her opposition to the very idea of God. I begin with a reminder of one feature of the passage quoted earlier from *We the Living*. One who believes in God "places his highest conception above his own possibility" and consequently "thinks very little of himself and his life." To accept the will of God as your guide in life is to devalue your own life and your own happiness. But Rand also had metaphysical and epistemological objections to the idea of God, at least as defined in the main monotheistic religions. In a 1945 letter to her close friend and ally in defense of individualism and capitalism, Isabel Paterson, she writes:

> My main argument [against God] is that the conception of God – or such as I have ever heard or read – denies every conception of the human mind. What is omnipotence? What is infinity? What is a being which is limitless – when the basic conception of existence in man's form of consciousness is the conception of an entity – which means a limit? An entity is that which other entities are not. What is an entity which is everything?
>
> (ARP 145_PA4_009_005)

Rand's claim that the standard conception of God "denies every conception of the human mind" needs to be understood by reference to the series of (rhetorical) questions she then asks: A being that is omnipotent, limitless and omnipresent is defined so as to be impossible for a rational mind to grasp – not only is God unlike anything we have experienced; such a being is unlike anything we *could* experience. It is as if the terms used to define God had been chosen precisely in order that the only way one could believe in such an entity would be on faith.

From early on, then, she had both metaphysical and epistemological grounds for rejecting the concept of "God." And as her philosophic views on these subjects became more sophisticated, so did those grounds. In a 1960 lecture,[12] "Faith and force: destroyers of the modern world," she reminds her listeners of the definition of reason[13] presented in John Galt's speech in her 1957 novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, and draws out some of its implications: "Let us define our terms. What is reason? Reason is the faculty which perceives,[14] identifies and integrates the

12 This lecture was presented in 1960 at Yale University, Brooklyn College, and Columbia University, and was later published (Rand 1982, 71–92).

13 A slightly abbreviated version of this definition is added parenthetically in the passage quoted from "Introducing objectivism" on the opening page of this chapter.

14 It is clear from the distinction she immediately draws between the perceptual and conceptual levels of cognition that "perceives" is here used broadly to refer to any form of cognitive awareness of reality.

material provided by man's senses. Reason integrates man's perceptions by means of forming abstractions or conceptions, thus raising man's knowledge from the *perceptual* level, which is shared with animals, to the *conceptual* level, which he alone can reach" (Rand 1984, 75). This is not the place for a detailed discussion of her epistemology.[15] For our purposes it will be sufficient to stress certain aspects of her account of reason, and especially of concept formation, that impact her views about God, as typically defined. To begin with, as is clear from the above quote, concepts, to be valid, must be grounded in perception:[16] first-level concepts directly, more abstract concepts indirectly, by way of integrating concepts that are less abstract. Moreover, concept formation does not happen automatically – it is a volitional activity, and success requires following specific methodological norms: "a perceiver's consciousness must acquire knowledge of reality by certain means (reason) in accordance with certain rules (logic) . . . the truth is not automatically available to a human consciousness and can be obtained only by a certain mental process which is required of every man who seeks knowledge" (Rand 1990b, 18).

Concept formation starts with the evidence provided by perception – "concepts" not so formed are invalid, and "God" is a paradigmatic invalid concept.[17] This is a point made a number of times in Galt's speech in *Atlas Shrugged*: "The good, say the mystics of spirit,[18] is God, a being whose only definition is that he is beyond man's power to conceive – a definition that invalidates man's consciousness and nullifies his concepts of existence" (Rand 1957, 1027).

Metaphysically, Rand defends the Aristotelian view that there is no such thing as "bare existence" – to be is to be something specific, to have an identity. God, as traditionally defined, is a metaphysical impossibility:

15 Rand's novel solution to the problem of concepts is presented in Rand (1990b). A clear overview and analysis can be found in Peikoff (1991, chs. 3–4). For a discussion of her theory in historical context, see the essays by Gotthelf and Salmieri in Gotthelf and Lennox (2013) and Salmieri (2016b).

16 She is a direct realist with regard to perception: Our sensory systems are the *means by which* we perceive, but *what* we perceive is external reality. Cf. Ghate (2013).

17 Unlike those, such as Richard Dawkins, who suggests "that the existence of God is a [highly improbable] scientific hypothesis like any other" (Dawkins 2006, 50), Rand argues that the concept is incoherent and the supposed referent of the concept a metaphysical impossibility. And, in part because of that, to accept belief in such a being on faith does immeasurable emotional and cognitive damage to the believer.

18 By the time she published *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand had started using the terms "mystic" and "mysticism" in a semi-technical way, as generic terms to refer to two categories of people and their belief systems: mystics of spirit and mystics of muscle. They differ over whether they designate God or some social collective (the State, the People, Society) as the superior being, and over the nature of the sacrifice that is to be expected. Rand was struck, historically, by the fact that during much of human history cultures have been dominated by an uneasy power-sharing arrangement between the two (cf. Rand 1961, 3–58).

> To exist is to possess identity. What identity are they able to give to their superior realm? They keep telling you what it is not, but never tell you what it is. All their identifications consist of negating: God is that which no human mind can know, they say – and proceed to demand that you consider it knowledge – God is non-man, heaven is non-earth, soul is non-body.
>
> (Rand 1957, 1035)

But if that is so, how can those espousing belief in God do so with such certainty? In dealing with this question, Rand returns to her attack on faith: "Man's standard of value [the mystics of spirit] say . . . is the pleasure of God, whose standards are beyond man's power of comprehension and must be accepted on faith" (Rand 1957, 1027). On what grounds, one might ask?

> They tell you that they possess a means of knowledge higher than the mind, a mode of consciousness superior to reason – like a special pull with some bureaucrat of the universe who gives them secret tips withheld from others. The mystics of spirit declare that they possess an extra sense you lack: this special sixth sense consists of contradicting the whole of the knowledge of your five.
>
> (Rand 1957, 1034)[19]

Such a criticism, of course, rests on her own distinctive understanding of reason, and specifically on her understanding of concept formation.[20] What her criticisms share with those of other atheists is the highlighting of the irrationality of those who postulate some mystical revelation of the existence of a being in a supernatural realm with attributes such as omnipotence and omniscience, which (by their own admission) are impossible for "ordinary" human reason to grasp.

She will, on occasion, appeal to other conventional grounds for rejecting a belief in God. During an appearance on a call-in radio program in March 1969, she was asked a number of questions about a belief in God.[21] To a general question about the compatibility of a belief in God and Objectivism, she responded that Objectivism "includes only what man can perceive, identify and demonstrate by means of reason . . . But there is no

19 Compare: "They claim they perceive a mode of being superior to your existence on this earth. [They] call it 'another dimension' which consists of denying dimensions . . . The restriction they seek to escape is the law of identity" (Rand 1957, 1036; cf. Rand 1990b, 148; The Objectivist Workshops Transcripts, 131).

20 In a later section we will see how their differences about the nature of reason impacts Rand's and Immanuel Kant's views about religious faith and the purpose of philosophy.

21 The talk show was *Night Call*, a nationally syndicated call-in show that aired in 1968–9 from WRVR, operating out of Riverside Church in New York City. The entire show is archived at: https://soundtheology.org/audio-programs.

evidence for any kind of God, afterlife, or mystical dimension" (Mayhew 2005, 149). When asked how she would account for the universe without God,[22] she replied that if by "the universe" the listener meant "everything that exists" then the question is invalid: "Existence, as such, does not require an explanation: it requires study" (Mayhew 2005, 150). In postulating a cause for existence, you would be postulating that it exists, and is therefore already part of the purported explanandum. And to a listener who insists that there must be a God to account for the design in nature,[23] Rand replied: "There is no design in nature. The consistency in nature . . . is not a product of design but of the Law of Identity . . . [Things] happen according to the Law of Identity: things act and interact according to their natures" (Mayhew 2005, 150).

That answer won't, presumably, satisfy someone who is asking the perfectly reasonable question about the origins of biological adaptations – to which natural selection is the appropriate answer. But Rand assumes the caller has in mind the typical deistic or Judeo-Christian idea that you need a divine origin to account for the "laws" of nature, for order in the universe. Adopting a generally Aristotelian view, she insists that no such origin is necessary: Entities have identities and act (and interact) on the basis of their identities. To account for the order displayed by natural processes, it is sufficient to appeal to the natures of the entities involved, which are discovered by scientific inquiry – that is, by the use of reason.

Rand Contra the Kantian Détente

By 1960, Ayn Rand had reached the conclusion that it was Immanuel Kant who had put the final nail in the coffin of the Enlightenment. In two essays, "Faith and force" and "For the new intellectual," both written in the early 1960s, she argued that he did this not by attacking reason but by subverting the concept:

> He [Kant] did not attack reason – he merely constructed such a version of what is reason that it made mysticism look like plain, rational common sense by comparison. He did not deny the validity of reason – he merely claimed that reason is "limited," that it leads us to impossible contradictions, that everything we perceive is an illusion and that we can never perceive reality or "things as they are." (Rand 1984, 87)

22 It appears the questioner is asking her to respond to Aquinas' Second Way, the "first cause" argument.

23 That is, Aquinas' Fifth Way.

Their diametrically opposed views about the power of reason implied diametrically opposed views about faith as well. In the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant stated that "I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" (Kant 1781 [1998], xxx).[24] Rand focused on this Kantian theme in "From the horse's mouth," an essay in which she reflects on the presentation of Kant's philosophy by Frederich Paulsen, a nineteenth-century neo-Kantian.[25] It praises Kant for arguing that philosophy's primary role is to mediate between science and religion: "the critical philosophy solves the old problem of the relationship between knowledge and faith. Kant is convinced that by properly fixing the limits of each he has succeeded in furnishing a basis for an honorable and enduring peace between them" (Paulsen, quoted in Rand 1984, 106). Recall that, for Rand, philosophy is the discipline that provides properly rational answers to questions, to which religion offered primitive and irrational answers, based on revelation and accepted on faith. She characterizes Kant's view of philosophy as "a contemptible middle-of-the-roader whose task is to seek a compromise – a détente – between truth and falsehood" (Rand 1984, 105).

As Paulsen explains, the critical philosophy assigns different domains to reason and to faith: "This gives to knowledge what belongs to it – the entire world of phenomena for free investigation: it conserves, on the other hand, to faith its eternal right to the interpretation of life and of the world from the standpoint of value" (Rand 1984, 107). Rand summarizes the implications of Kantian doctrine for the respective roles of faith and reason in human life: "The Kantian division allows man's reason to conquer the material world,[26] but eliminates reason from the choice of the goals for which material achievements are to be used. Man's goals, actions, choices, and values –

24 See, too, his view of the "inescapable" relationship between morality and religion, from the Preface to the first edition of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*: "So morality leads inescapably to religion, through which it extends itself to the idea of a powerful moral lawgiver, outside of mankind, whose aim in creating the world is to bring about the final state of the world that men can and ought to aim at also" (www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/kant1793part1.pdf).

25 The book was Friedrich Paulsen's *Immanuel Kant: His Life and Doctrine*. Paulsen succeeded Edmund Zeller as Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Berlin in 1896. The original German edition, *Immanuel Kant. Sein Leben und seine Lehre*, was published in 1898 (Stuttgart, Fr. Frommanns Verlag). An English translation by J. E. Crombie and A. Lefevre was published in 1902 by Charles Scribner's Sons. Rand appears to have been using a 1963 facsimile (produced by F. Ungar of New York) of the 1902 translation. I thank Jason Rheins for help in sorting out this puzzling publication history.

26 Although, as she notes a few lines earlier, on Paulsen's (orthodox) understanding of Kant, reason only has empirical access to the world of "phenomena," not to things-in-themselves. Thus, from Rand's point of view, even the claim that Kant leaves reason free to explore the material world is suspect.

according to Kant – are to be determined irrationally, by faith" (Rand 1984, 107). Kant is providing an elaborate philosophical justification for the divorce of mankind's most essential tool of survival, his reason, from the pursuit of personal values and goals. That is to be the realm in which faith reigns supreme – precisely what Ayn Rand found most destructive in traditional religion's impact on human life. As she put the point in "Causality versus duty," an essay attacking deontological moral codes such as Kant's: "A deontological (duty-centered) theory of ethics confines moral principles to a list of prescribed 'duties' and leaves the rest of man's life without any moral guidance, cutting morality off from any application to the actual problems and concerns of man's existence" (Rand 1984, 13). Like Christianity, Kant and his followers eliminate reason from playing any role in determining the proper values for human beings to pursue and the best means of achieving them.

Cultural Consequences: Ayn Rand and the Religious Takeover of American Conservatism

During the 1930s and 1940s, Rand had worked tirelessly to convince conservatives that, so long as they attempted to rest their defense of individualism and free-market capitalism on religious faith, they were doomed to failure.[27] Even the person she considered her closest ally in this battle, Isabel Paterson, was strongly inclined to the view Rand opposed, as she noted in a letter to Paterson in 1945: "you believe unless I accept God, I will have betrayed the cause of individualism, that the case for individualism rests on faith in God – and on nothing else. To the best of my rational understanding, the opposite is true" (ARP 145_PA4_009_006; Berliner 1995, 184).[28]

Paterson was author of *The God of the Machine*, columnist and book review editor for the *New York Herald-Tribune*, and a leading advocate of individualism and political liberty. In later correspondence, Paterson is straightforward about her disagreement with Rand on the issue of atheism and individual

27 The best primary source for this aspect of her career is her correspondence with other defenders of free-market individualism, especially with Isabel Paterson, Leonard Read, Rose Wilder Lane, William Mullendore, and Henry Hazlitt, for which consult the index to Berliner (1995). Her notes for a non-fiction work on *The Moral Basis of Individualism*, written between 1942 and 1945, are also valuable (Harriman 1997, 243–310).

28 For more on their relationship, see Milgram (2016). A selection of Rand's letters to Paterson can be found in Berliner (1995, 173–218). Both sides of the correspondence are in the Ayn Rand Archives. For details on the life and thought of Isabel Paterson, see Cox (2004). There is a brief discussion of the relationship between Paterson and Rand at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isabel_Paterson#Paterson_and_Ayn_Rand.

rights: "I have said that I think you'll be in trouble if you ever try to posit that Man has rights, without assuming an immortal soul and God" (13 May 1948; ARP 145_PA7_008_004).

As with Paterson, so with most mid-century political conservatives – Rand's efforts to convince them of the need for a rational, non-religious defense of individualism failed, and by the time she had published *Atlas Shrugged*, she was gravely concerned that there was an organized effort under way by religious leaders to take control of American conservatism. In a prescient letter to Barry Goldwater in 1960 (Berliner 1995, 591), she warned him that an organized group of "professional religionists" was working toward that goal. In a Princeton lecture delivered the same year, entitled "Conservatism: an obituary,"[29] she distinguishes three arguments used by conservatives to justify capitalism: from faith, from tradition, and from [human] depravity. Of the first, she writes: "Sensing their need of a moral base, many 'conservatives' decided to choose religion as their moral justification; they claim that America and capitalism are based on faith in God" (Rand 1966, 198). After pointing out that implementing that idea would violate the constitutional prohibition on bringing religion into politics, she goes on to point out the obvious concession this makes to capitalism's enemies: "Intellectually, to rest one's case on faith means to concede that reason is on the side of one's enemies – that one has no rational arguments to offer . . . While the communists claim that they are the representatives of reason and science, the "conservatives" concede it and retreat into the realm of mysticism" (Rand 1966, 198).[30]

A related, though distinct, feature of the conservative's reliance on religious faith to ground a defense of capitalism is the argument from human depravity: "'You can't change human nature,' is their stock answer to the socialists. Thus they concede that socialism is the ideal, but human nature is unworthy of it; after which, they invite men to crusade for capitalism – a crusade one would have to start by spitting in one's own face" (Rand 1966, 200–1). Religious conservatives also accept the doctrine of original sin, of our inherently "fallen" nature. In this essay, Rand stresses the conclusion conservatives derive from this belief for the nature of government: "since men are weak, fallible, non-omniscient and innately depraved, no man may be entrusted with the responsibility of being a dictator and of ruling everyone else; therefore, a free society is the proper way of life for imperfect creatures"

29 The lecture was delivered on 7 December 1960 at Princeton. For more on the history of Ayn Rand's fundamental disillusionment with American conservatism, see Burns (2004, 359–85) and Lewis and Salmieri (2016, esp. 352–5, 381–5).

30 She made this point a number of times in the correspondence with Isabel Paterson referred to earlier.

(Rand 1966, 200).This lecture, and her letter to Goldwater, were penned almost two decades before the formation of the Moral Majority by Jerry Falwell in 1979 – she saw it coming. In her last Ford Hall Forum lecture in 1981, entitled "The age of mediocrity,"[31] she attacked the Moral Majority for its theocratic intentions, and Ronald Reagan for his sell out to the religious right.[32] Less than a decade later, Falwell disbanded his organization, declaring "[o]ur goal has been achieved . . . The religious right is solidly in place and . . . religious conservatives in America are now in for the duration."[33] Alas, all too true – Ayn Rand had seen it coming for decades. What began as a doomed attempt to defend individual liberty on religious grounds had morphed into an attack on individual liberty and reason in the name of a primitive form of biblical fundamentalism.

Apart from her attack on the idea of grounding a "defense" of individualism and capitalism on religious faith and dogma, Rand regularly drew attention to a fatal flaw in a defense of capitalism based on Christian moral theory: Christian ethics are fundamentally at odds with the nature of capitalism. Christianity's primary symbol, Jesus Christ crucified on the cross for the sins of others, elevates sacrifice for others to the status of a cardinal virtue:

> Christ, in terms of the Christian philosophy, is the human ideal. He personifies that which men should emulate. Yet, according to Christian mythology, he died on the cross not for his own sins but for the sins of the nonideal people . . . If I were a Christian, nothing could make me more indignant than that: the notion of sacrificing the ideal to the nonideal, or virtue to vice. And it is in the name of that symbol that men are asked to sacrifice themselves for their inferiors.
>
> (Rand, in Toffler and Rand 1964, 10)

From this point of view, selfish, productive pursuit of personal values is evil (or, at best, not praiseworthy), while self-sacrifice and turning away from the pursuit of material values offers hope of personal salvation. For religious conservatives, then, the primary evil of communism is not its denial of individual rights and freedom, but its "godless materialism." How, then, does the religious right defend capitalism when it is attacked from the left for its greed (e.g. by Pope Francis), when in the end they agree with the moral basis of those attacks? Rand saw herself as developing and defending a moral theory that could serve as a proper foundation for capitalism, one appropriate

31 A recording of this lecture is available at https://ari.aynrand.org/issues/government-and-business/individual-rights/the-age-of-mediocrity.

32 She was especially active in advocating for a woman's right to an abortion and attacked attempts by the religious right to restrict or deny it.

33 Quoted in Allitt (2003, 198).

for a country whose constitution guarantees individuals the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of their own happiness.

I now return to the connection she identified as far back as 1935, between faith and force. In a 1961 lecture she responded to a question about "keeping religion out of politics" by spelling out what she saw as the wisdom of the separation of church and state advocated by America's Founding Fathers:

> If religion is brought into the running of the state, or the ideology on which it is based, then the first question is: Whose religion? Then we return to a church-and-state union, where no compromise and no agreement between men is possible, since each religion claims its own belief and its own authority, not by means of arguments and reason but by faith.
>
> (Mayhew 2005, 62)

A bit later she sums up her points: "With the American separation of church and state, all religions live together peacefully, because each man is free to hold his own beliefs but cannot force them on others" (Mayhew 2005, 62–3).[34] On the other hand, to a question about whether opposing altruism philosophically implies "fighting religion," Rand responded: "Leave people to be wrong in their own way. So long as they don't force their ideas on you, you cannot forbid religion to anyone. Further, it's not difficult to fight religion when you have a good philosophy" (Mayhew 2005, 63).[35]

To which, I can only add, Amen!

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34 The lecture was "The Political Vacuum of Our Age." The audiotape is stored in the Ayn Rand Archives, reference number 61-4-8a. On Rand's understanding of and support for the principle of the separation of Church and State, see Ghate (2019). Compare Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, query 17 (on religion): "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg . . . Reason and free enquiry are the only effectual agents against error. Give a loose to them, they will support the true religion, by bringing every false one to their tribunal, to the test of their investigation. They are the natural enemies of error, and of error only" (Jefferson, in Peden 1954, 159).

35 This chapter benefited greatly from the comments of Gregory Salmieri and Robert Mayhew on earlier drafts. Thanks to them, and to Jenniffer Woodson, archivist at the Ayn Rand Institute, for providing me with access to the Ayn Rand Archives.

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37

Darwinism

ROBERT T. PENNOCK

Darwinian evolution is an overarching explanatory framework that makes sense of the characteristic patterns of the biological world. Evolutionary science is a progressive research program that is as well-confirmed as findings in other scientific disciplines. In this sense, it is not different from chemistry or physics. There is one significant difference, however, in that evolution continues to be subjected to regular attacks from some religious quarters, especially in the United States, where the issues have had considerable political, legal, and sociocultural significance.

There is no better example of this than the Scopes Monkey Trial, in which two legal titans – Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan – battled in a hot courtroom in Dayton, Tennessee in the summer of 1925 over the status of the Butler Act, which outlawed the teaching of evolution in the state's public schools. The trial had little to do with Scopes himself – a substitute teacher who agreed to serve as defendant to provide a basis for a trial to challenge the constitutionality of the law – and was really seen as a fight over the status of modern science in relation to religious fundamentalism (Larson 1997). Fundamentalists saw Darwinian evolution as the linchpin of a modernist worldview that denied God, questioned the special status of human beings in creation, and undermined morality.

Scopes was found guilty, but the verdict was overturned on a technicality, so it wasn't until the *Epperson v. Arkansas* case of 1968 that laws like the Butler Act were tested and found to violate the separation of church and state. With evolution then allowed in schools, creationists tried other tactics but consistently lost when these were tried in court. The 1981 *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education* and the 1987 *Edwards v. Aguillard* cases found that laws requiring "balanced treatment" of evolution and so-called "creation science" were unconstitutional. Following their defeat in the Edwards case, creationists retooled a textbook they had been writing for schools so that it spoke of

"intelligent design theory" instead of "creation science" and left out specific claims about the age of the earth, but the 2005 *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* ruled that putting this new form of intelligent design creationism (IDC) into schools was similarly unconstitutional.

Each of these trials was significant in the cultural debate, though not necessarily in the usual way in which they were framed, namely, as simple battles in a supposed warfare of religion and science; the disputants' own views were often far more simplistic than the full range of scientific and religious positions about the matter. One sees this even with regard to the central terms at play in the debate.

This is especially so with regard to Darwinism. In a basic sense, the term has often been used just as a synonym for organic evolution (Numbers 1998, 1). Mostly, however, historians of biology use the term when they are focusing on Darwin's special discoveries and contributions. Sometimes it is used more narrowly to emphasize the role of natural selection as a key explanatory element in evolution (it is for this reason, for instance, that biologists like Richard Dawkins who look first and foremost to selection to account for any feature of the biological world are sometimes referred to as "ultra-Darwinists") or to draw a contrast to alternatives such as Lamarckism, which tried to explain evolutionary change in terms of the inheritance of acquired characteristics (e.g. Ruse 1979; Bowler 1983). In such scholarly venues, it carries no more baggage than the term Mendelism does when discussing Gregor Mendel's work. However, in contemporary, public settings, creationists brandish the term Darwinism, with the "ism" emphasized, to make evolution sound like a dogmatic ideology. Again, this is especially true in the United States, where evolution is seen by many religious believers as equivalent to atheism. Some writers argue that Darwinian evolution implies atheism, while others use the term to refer to a metaphysically atheistic worldview generally.

It is the relationship between these different views that we will examine here to try to see just what, if anything, Darwinism has to do with atheism.

We will focus on Darwinism in the scientific sense as referring to the aspects of evolutionary biology that are most associated with Darwin's own discoveries and with the biology that followed from these. But even here one must be careful of rhetorical uses of terminology. For example, creationists also often pointedly refer to evolution as "Darwin's theory." Again, in scientific and historical contexts this is not problematic. However, because non-scientists interpret the term "theory" colloquially as an idea that is more or less equivalent to an initial guess, anti-evolutionists emphasize this term to

make evolution seem weak, especially in comparison to the hard laws of physics. Such a view is seriously misleading. In science, when the term *theory* is used in this way (such as in gravitational theory or cell theory) it does not mean a guess. Neither does it stand in contrast with fact or law. Scientific theories are explanatory frameworks, which include facts as well as laws. Evolution is no exception. Evolution explains not only the origin of species, but also their geographical distribution, their nested phylogenetic relationships, their patterns of interaction, as well as many other distinctive aspects of the biological world. Perhaps most importantly for our interests here, it also explains biological adaptations.

Darwin's discovery of the law of evolution by natural selection revealed how simple natural processes could produce complex, functional traits. The random variations that arise in organisms lead to differential chances of surviving and reproducing in an environment, and when these variations are heritable the useful ones will be passed on with greater frequency in the population to the next generation. As the process is repeated over the generations, this natural selection by the environment shapes those traits so that over time the population of organisms will become more and more adapted to their circumstances. Because evolution by natural selection is key to understanding biological adaptations, in a straightforward sense it is reasonable to call this core discovery Darwinism. Indeed, for several decades around the turn of the century, biologists de-emphasized natural selection and sought other mechanisms – a period that was called the "eclipse of Darwinism" for that reason (Bowler 1983). On the other hand, associating evolutionary theory today just with Darwin is misleading because evolutionary science did not end with Darwin. As research continued, Darwin's account was improved and the evidence for it continued to accrue.

Post-Darwin Evidence for Evolution

For instance, a major weakness of Darwin's account at the time was that he could provide few details about how biological traits were passed on. He hypothesized that heritable traits were stored in "gemmules" – minute particles that were given off by cells that controlled development and could be passed on to offspring – but he had no experimental evidence to support their existence and aspects of the concept were problematic, such as why variation that arose was not diminished by blending. Work by Hugo de Vries and August Weisman corrected key problems with Darwin's hypothesis, and the new concept of the gene received further empirical support as it was

combined with Gregor Mendel's work on genetic factors and the laws of inheritance. Watson and Crick's discovery of the structure of DNA provided the molecular basis for the storage and inheritance of biological information.

Evidence about the pathways of evolution has also greatly improved since Darwin. At that time, fossil investigations of the history of life on earth were still in their infancy. Darwin discovered and studied many fossils himself, but he acknowledged that the fossil record was significantly incomplete, and he had to hope that future work would fill in the gaps in the evolutionary history it was beginning to reveal. Research by paleontologists in subsequent decades has done just that, filling in more and more of the phylogenetic picture in ways that were predicted by evolutionary theory. The human fossil record, now supplemented by fossil DNA analysis (Cepelewicz 2019), has become especially rich, providing clear evidence about how we, like other animals, have evolved from earlier forms.

There have also been general theoretical advances since Darwin, such as the neutral theory, which showed how evolution could occur in populations without natural selection. In thinking about the reason that evolution is thought of as relevant to the theism vs. atheism question, however, this sort of evolutionary change is not especially relevant, so we will restrict our discussion to what is most distinctively Darwinian about evolutionary science, which is the explanation of biological adaptations in terms of natural selection. In the last few decades, experimental evolution has become increasingly productive as a way to test evolutionary hypotheses about the processes and patterns of evolution by natural selection and to observe evolution in action. Experimental evolution is now regularly done using real organisms, and also with digital models that instantiate Darwin's law in populations of evolving digital organisms. A major advantage of digital evolution is that it allows researchers to perform carefully controlled evolutionary experiments, to easily replicate them, and to observe the effects of natural selection under different conditions over hundreds of thousands of generations.

All this and a wide range of other evidence are taken by modern evolutionists as confirming Darwin's account of the evolution of all organisms, including humans. Darwinism in this basic biological sense is one of the most well-tested and well-confirmed of any scientific theory. But why does this have anything to do with the status of theism and atheism? In what follows, we will highlight four general reasons that have often been offered for why it may be relevant, and briefly consider their significance.

Why is Darwinism Seen as Relevant to the Status of Theism?

Fundamentalist Theism

Perhaps the most common reason that Darwinism is seen to be relevant to the status of theism involves the way in which evolutionary science contradicts a literal reading of the Bible. If one's religious beliefs include a commitment to Genesis as a straightforwardly factual account of the creation of the world and human beings, including the special creation of Adam and Eve as our original ancestors, then the scientific account of an ancient world within which living things, including human beings, descended with modification from earlier, ancestral forms will be seen as a direct challenge.

For many Bible believers, such factual questions have significant theological import. Evangelical theologian Wayne Grudem, for instance, states what he takes to be religiously at stake if evolution is true:

> [I]f there was no Adam and Eve, and/or if they did not fall from a state of moral innocence into sin, and if Adam's corrupted sin nature was not inherited by all his human descendants, then it is hard to understand the very precise later biblical explanations of the parallel way in which Christ's atoning sacrifice gained forgiveness for all who were represented by him. In fact . . . if Paul was wrong about the entire human race descending from Adam, he might also have been wrong about all human beings *inheriting* a common sin nature from Adam, and therefore, he could well be wrong about our gaining forgiveness and righteousness through our representation by Christ. (Grudem 2017, 75)

For those who view the Bible's story of Adam and Eve as the literal word of God, doubt about even simple factual matters calls their whole theological edifice into question. For such believers, as was exhibited in the Scopes Trial, the Darwinian idea that humans were related to monkeys was not just distasteful, but theologically anathema.

This is not to say that biblical literalists agreed with one another about the particulars of such matters. For instance, Darwinian evolution is slow and holds that the diversity of life on earth is the result of millions of years of gradual change, but many creationists read the Bible as saying that no more than 10,000 years has passed since God created the heavens and the earth. These "young earth" creationists (YECs) thus reject not only evolution, but also geology. "Old earth" creationists, on the other hand, such as William Jennings Bryan, saw no problem accommodating a long geological timescale into their reading of Scripture, given that the "days" of Creation could very well be thought of as

ages. One must wade into deeper hermeneutic waters than is appropriate here to see why one group views the scientific finding of the age of the earth to be a threat to God and the other sees it as unproblematic. Intelligent design creationism (IDC) was a strategic alliance of YECs and OECs who agreed to temporarily set aside their differences on this point in the service of mounting a united campaign against their common enemy. The point for us here is that this element of Darwinism may be taken to be a threat to theism if one has a theology that involves commitments to very specific features of the natural world and that one is willing to investigate these under the usual assumptions of scientific methodology.

As it turns out, however, because the YEC view of God really is supernatural, they actually do not countenance the scientific evidence for an ancient earth as disconfirming, explaining it as only the "appearance" of age. But for someone who thought of the Bible and God in naive, natural terms, such as the way a child does, the science that supports Darwinism would be a blow. Many atheists describe that they lost their original childhood belief in God once they learned of the vast range of evidence that supports evolution and the rest of the scientific picture of the world. As their childhood belief in the biblical story of Noah's Flood, for example, was recognized as false, they concluded that God was false as well. Mainstream theologians fault atheists of this sort for not having seriously considered God in more than this naive manner.

Darwinism and Morality

A second major way in which Darwinism has been seen as relevant to the status of theism involves its role in the moral issues that underlie the debate.

For instance, creationists take morality itself to be at stake and see evolution as the tool of the devil in a war between good and evil. It is not a coincidence that they often speak of evolution as "evil-ution." Henry Morris, the pioneering creationist who set the model for that movement, traced evolutionism back to the Tower of Babel and its false pantheon of gods as was taught by Nimrod, the ruler of Babel and builder of the tower that was to challenge the one true God. According to Morris, it was Satan himself who invented the evolutionary concept to deceive the nations and to turn human beings away from God. For creationists, evolution and its godless worldview is to blame for everything from abortion and homosexuality to divorce, genocide, and bestiality.[1]

1 See Pennock (1999, ch. 7) for a detailed account of these and other moral issues that YECs and IDCs take to be at stake in the evolution debate.

This sort of view of typically arises from the theological notion that the Bible provides the foundation of morality by revealing the nature of Creation and the commandments of God. According to IDC leader Phillip Johnson, the evolutionary worldview contradicts the theists' belief that human beings were created by God with a purpose in mind, to be fulfilled in eternity, and leaves morality to the subjective whims of individuals. He sees the scientific naturalism of evolution as a story that "portrays life as a meaningless competition among organisms that exist only to survive and reproduce" (Johnson 1995, 197).

It is worth mentioning two serious errors with the simple creationist view of how morality relates to God and to Darwinism.

The first is a mistake about morality itself. It has long been recognized by ethicists that what is moral cannot be simply a function of what God commands, as that would make morality arbitrary. As Plato originally made the point, it would not be that something is good because the gods command it, but rather that the gods command it because it is good. What that means is that morality has a conceptual autonomy that is independent of God. The task of ethical theory is to try to make sense of what that might be.

The second is a mistake about how morality relates more specifically to how Darwinism is portrayed. The sort of view that creationists like Johnson express arises in part from a common misunderstanding of the nature of evolution. Often it is based on Herbert Spencer's gloss of Darwinian evolution as "survival of the fittest," which is meant to be a descriptive account of how natural selection works, but is often misinterpreted as also being a moral standard. Social Darwinism, the view that social hierarchies, including social class, reflected a moral sorting, was one such example – being better off was a sign that one was indeed (morally) better. On this view, those at the bottom of the social ladder, having lost the competition in the social struggle for resources, *deserved* their lesser position. A morality based on this flawed ethical foundation pits each against every other in a pitiless fight for dominance, where might makes right. Such a world of morality, red in tooth and claw, leaves little room for an ethics where duty, love, or kindness have a place.

It is hardly fair, however, to tar evolutionary science or atheism with this seriously mistaken view of the relation of morality to evolution. Even an arch-Darwinian atheist like Richard Dawkins has said that while evolution is excellent as an explanation of the biological world, it should not be looked to as a moral code. Darwinian evolution is a scientific account of how organisms evolve, not a philosophical account of what behaviors are or are not moral.

On the other hand, evolution does have much to say about our *capacity* for morality and how that may be explained. Darwin himself speculated about how the evolution of the social instincts could provide a basis for a "moral sense" that, with an increase in intelligence, could be shaped into what we recognize as human morality. Darwin discussed how this may relate not only to how this could lead to the golden rule to do to others as you would have them do to you, but also how it may relate to deontological and utilitarian ethics (Pennock 1995).

A final point where Darwinism and morality bear upon the question of God involves the argument from evil. How could one believe in an omnipotent and all-good Creator in the face of the cruelty of nature? Darwin himself mentions a particularly cringeworthy example of parasitism to illustrate this point. As an argument for atheism, such examples have no special connection to Darwinism *per se*, as they are independent of the evolutionary explanation of biological adaptations. On the other hand, Darwin did think that his discovery of the law of evolution by natural selection might provide some consolation for some believers, noting that: "[I]t has always appeared to me more satisfactory to look at the immense amount of pain & suffering in this world, as the inevitable result of the natural sequence of events, i.e. general laws, rather than from the direct intervention of God though I am aware this is not logical with reference to an omniscient Deity" (Darwin 1866).

The Design Argument

A more philosophically significant reason for the relevance of Darwinism to the status of theism has to do with its role in the so-called "teleological" or "design" argument for the existence of God. The classic version of the argument comes from Thomas Aquinas, who argued by analogy that the order, purpose, and regularity of the world exhibited design and that design of this sort implies a designer who must be God. William Paley's *Natural Theology* is the most famous extended articulation of this argument, but other religious apologists offered versions of it before and since. Biological adaptations appear frequently as examples of the kind of patterns found in nature and are often taken to be the most important of the purported indicators of divine design. Here is Paley writing of the wonderful design of the epiglottis:

> [W]e may here remark the almost complete success of the expedient, viz. how seldom it fails of its purpose, compared with the number of instances in which it fulfills it. Reflect how frequently we swallow, how constantly we breathe. In a city feast, for example, what deglutition, what anhelation! yet does this little

> cartilage, the epiglottis, so effectually interpose its office, so securely guard the entrance of the wind-pipe, that whilst morsel after morsel, draught after draught, are coursing one another over it, an accident of a crumb or a drop slipping into this passage (which nevertheless must be opened for the breath every second of time), excites in the whole company, not only alarm by its danger, but surprise by its novelty. Not two guests are choked in a century.
>
> (Paley 1850, 105–6)

An atheist might begin by challenging some key facts in this argument, perhaps citing figures from national injury reports showing that in the United States the lifetime odds of dying by choking on food was 1 in 2696, accounting for over 5000 deaths in 2017, many orders of magnitude higher than Paley estimated (National Safety Council 2017). If the epiglottis were the creation of an omnipotent designer, shouldn't it have been expected to do better? Doesn't that make it evidence against God? A theist might reply that, for all we know, this may be the best possible design for an epiglottis and that any other design would have been worse in the overall scheme of the world. An agnostic might ask how are we limited human beings in any position to know what God's intention was with regard to who would or wouldn't choke, or what number was divinely intended, or even whether deaths by choking might have been meant to be just deserts, perhaps for gluttony or some other sin. This sort of back and forth argument can (and usually does) go on indefinitely for the epiglottis or anything else offered as an example of design in nature.

A Darwinian might point out that the heritable variations in the shape of the epiglottis would make some more effective than others, thus making its functionality subject to natural selection. Given the billions of people eating many billions of meals each year, 5000 choking deaths is actually very impressive, and certainly evolution may be thanked for that relatively low number. But having an evolutionary explanation does nothing to resolve the theological debate. Although Darwinism undermines the simple God-of-the-gaps or the more sophisticated teleological argument in that it shows how the design of biological adaptations can be produced by natural processes, showing that God is not necessary is not the same as saying that God doesn't exist or is any more or less likely. It is not clear why Darwinism is any more or less relevant to the question than it was to show that the planets moved in their orbits by a law of universal gravitation and did not require divine nudging to remain in alignment.

Is Darwinism a Scientific Test of God?

We now turn to a fourth reason for why Darwinism is thought to be relevant to the status of theism, which is that some take it to be a test case for God. For

some theists, it functions as part of a scientific test proving that God exists. For some atheists, it is part of a scientific test that disproves God. We look at these in turn where they have played out most forcefully in the creationism vs. evolution debate.

Creationists' goal is to have their particular fundamentalist theology proven scientifically. As noted, this involves a wide variety of specific Bible-based claims, but here we focus just on the key issue of proving God as Creator. Their argument is that there are only two possible models to choose from: Darwinian evolution or supernatural Creation. There is insufficient space here to get into the details, so I'll just briefly summarize the review of this I have given elsewhere (Pennock 1996; 1999).

For Henry Morris and other YECs, the choice was between creation science and evolution science, while IDCs describe the choice as between intelligent design and Darwinism. The structure of the argument is the same in both cases – this is purported to be a forced choice with two and only two non-overlapping options. What this means is that if one is false then the other must be true. This is why creationist writings focus on giving arguments against evolution and trying to show weaknesses in the evidence they present. A "dual model" duel to the death allows them to simply argue that evolution is unable to account for some feature of the biological world; if evolution fails, then God wins by default.

The problem with this is that they present a false dichotomy: creation science and evolution science, as YECs defined them, are not the only options. So, even if they were to come up with some case that evolution could not explain, that would not be sufficient to prove their particular conception of God and creation. IDCs work harder to try to set up a workable dichotomy by building atheism into the definition of Darwinism so that when evolution is found wanting, then atheism necessarily falls as well, but it has similar problems.

Johnson does not deny that evolution by natural selection occurs if all one means by that is that "limited changes occur in populations due to differences in survival rates" (Johnson 1990, 2). Historically, creationists denied even this basic form of Darwinism, but eventually they pulled back and accepted that microevolution was fine within God-created "kinds," but that individuals can diversify only within the limits of the kind (Johnson 1991, 68). They regrouped there and tried to hold the line against macroevolution, by which they meant transformation from one created kind to another. (Never mind that there is no clear line between micro and macroevolution.) Really, the point is that kinds must have been the result of an original creative act. However, because he acknowledges that it is possible that God did not create creatures suddenly, but used instead a gradual evolutionary process, even macroevolution does not

contradict creationism unless it is "explicitly or tacitly defined as fully naturalistic evolution – meaning evolution that is not directed by any purposeful intelligence" (Johnson 1991, 4). This is how Johnson attempted to narrow the target to set up the IDC argument. He defined Darwinism so that it builds in a "fully naturalistic" metaphysics: "By 'Darwinism' I mean fully naturalistic evolution, involving chance mechanisms guided by natural selection" (Johnson 1991, 4). With metaphysical naturalism baked into Darwinism, he hoped to pull metaphysical theism out on the other side once Darwinism has been defeated.

Again, we do not have the space to review the details, but the core IDC attack on Darwinism was done in terms of what they called the "specified complexity" or "irreducible complexity" (the latter is one case of the former) they said could be found in biological structures such as the bacterial flagellum. Irreducible complexity was defined to try to throw a wrench in the mechanism of evolution. Here is how IDC leader Michael Behe defined it: "By irreducibly complex I mean a single system composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively stop functioning" (Behe 1996, 39). If removing any of the parts causes the system to stop its "basic function" then a gradual evolutionary process could never have produced it. Or so the claim went.

YECs had already made exactly this sort of claim under the name "functional complexity," and all these are very similar to the old challenge about the complexity of the human eye. "What good is half an eye?" it was asked, implying that evolution by natural selection could never produce a finished complex structure if intermediate steps didn't work. Darwin himself had discussed the complexity of the eye as a serious difficulty for this account. He didn't have evidence at that point for a detailed account, but he already had the right general answer, which is that new functions are built on old ones, with the selective utility of traits changing over time. Behe's particular version of this challenge may be refuted conceptually in the same way by showing how irreducibly complex systems are not a counterexample but can be explained by the ordinary workings of evolution by natural selection (Pennock 1999, 263–72). Behe acknowledged the error in his definition (Behe 2001), but thought that it was reparable. It is not. Using digital evolution that directly instantiates the evolutionary mechanism, researchers are able to directly test Darwin's solution to the puzzle of complex features and can observe evolution in action as it produces irreducible complex functional systems (e.g. Lenski et al. 2003).

Even if evolutionary theory did not have a ready answer to the complexity challenge, that would not have clinched the IDC argument for theistic

realism because of the error in the way the dilemma was set up. Although their legal strategy prevented their naming the purported creator or intelligent designer as the God of the Bible, the attributes of the purported designer made it clear that this was a religious concept. More than that, it was a sectarian notion, for IDCs and other creationists reject many mainstream theological options, which would remain even if Darwinism were defeated. Furthermore, there would always be the possibility of other scientific explanations. Johnson's metaphysically naturalist definition of Darwinism was actually the conjunction of two theses: (1) the specific evolutionary mechanism discovered by Darwin; and (2) the atheistic denial of divine design. All of Johnson's and other creationists' arguments are directed at (1), so even if they had been successful they would still have left (2) untouched.

The creationists' view is a form of the God-of-the-gaps argument (Pennock 2007). They hope to prove God by showing features of the world that they say cannot be explained in natural terms. Mainstream theologians reject this sort of argument, holding that it is a naive error to see God as existing only in the explanatory gaps of our knowledge. As science progressively closes those gaps, such an approach makes it appear that there is no place left for God. That, of course, is the alternative conclusion to thinking that Darwinism is a test of God, and it is why some atheists concur with creationists about how to view the issue. In this sense, they are taking something of a fundamentalist view over mainstream theology. Both see biological adaptations as test cases for divine design, but while creationists take them to be confirming of the "God hypothesis," these atheists see them as a refutation.

However, it is no clearer on the atheist side why Darwinism provides any sort of a test. Atheists of this sort argue that supernatural hypotheses have regularly failed as explanations of empirical phenomena. But, actually, the opposite is the case. Indeed, supernatural hypotheses make it too easy to explain, as miracles have no limits. That is the problem; they can "explain" anything, which means that they can't fail at all (Pennock 1996; 1999, ch. 4). It is not that supernatural hypotheses were tested and disproven, but that scientists came to recognize that they could play no role in the evidence-based methods of natural philosophy.[2]

2 It is for reasons related to epistemic requirements for evidence that science methodologically disallows appeal to supernatural hypotheses. This is very different from what Boudry et al. call "intrinsic" methodological naturalism, which holds that science rejects the supernatural stipulatively, by a definition that "drop[s] out of thin air" (Boudry et al. 2010).

This takes us back to the concept of God as supernatural creator. Examples given of the supposed failure of the God hypothesis beg the question by treating God (or whatever supernatural power is supposedly being tested) naturally.[3] While that reconceptualization may be acceptable for purported powers like ESP (extrasensory perception), it cannot be countenanced by most robust theologies, which take God to be supernatural by definition. God creates nature out of nothing or out of chaos in some metaphysical sense. The supernatural is by definition "above" or "beyond" the laws of nature.[4] God is not constrainable or understandable in principle in any worldly sense. Philosophers and theologians may debate whether such notions are reasonable, but they are not a part of testable science. God may miraculously act within indeterministic laws, or by breaking deterministic natural laws, or by continuously sustaining and upholding them, or any combination, and science would be none the wiser. Atheists who think that Darwinism has disproved God simply do not take the religious notion of the supernatural seriously.

Incompatibilism vs. Compatibilism

In 1874, the theologian Charles Hodge, who was head of Princeton Theological Seminary at the time of the publication of the *Origin of Species*, published a treatise whose title posed the question *What is Darwinism?*. His answer was that it is atheism (Hodge 1874). Hodge was no biblical literalist, but he thought

3 For instance, Boudry et al. (2010) use the example of an experiment to test and refute the efficacy of intercessory prayer. If one treats prayer as a natural independent causal variable, then the test and conclusion are unproblematic. But this kind of experiment begs the theological question, as divine supernatural intercession is certainly not thought of in this way. Monton (2009) uses a hypothetical test that starts with what seems to be a generic God hypothesis, but then adds a premise that treats God's intention (a desire to create life) in natural terms. Again, for someone who thought of God whose mind worked in ordinary, natural ways, the inference that God does or doesn't exist (depending on the circumstances of scenario) would not be problematic, but the standard theological assumption is that the supernatural mind of God is not of a kind with ours or something we could in principle ever know, so the thought experiment again begs the question.

4 In a recent paper, Boucher (2019) rejects the possibility of understanding the natural in terms of laws. He considers a strong notion of law (as "universal, invariant, necessary, etc.") and argues that "nature could've been utter chaos" as a counterexample. I, too, question some old, strong notions of law, but see no reason to rule out causal laws in general. Moreover, it is hard to know why Boucher thinks that chaos is counter to the scientific notion of law. Chaos theory is well-developed, with clear examples of how chaotic processes can be explained by deterministic laws. Furthermore, causal laws need not be deterministic. Indeed, our best current physical theories seem to indicate that indeterministic processes are built into the fabric of nature. It seems he has in mind some metaphysical notion of chaos ("utter"), but that again takes us out of the realm of nature in just the way that one expects a supernatural notion to do so.

that Darwinian evolution contradicted the basic Christian notion that the beauty and grandeur of creation were the result of God's intellectual, guided process, and not a purposeless natural force like gravity. IDC leader William Dembski, when he was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary, co-founded the Charles Hodge Society to try to resuscitate interest in Hodge's view. Jonathan Wells, another IDC leader, glossed Hodge's view in a way that fit with how they tried to set up their dual model argument: "Design is an essential corollary of Christian belief in God, but Darwin's theory excludes design and thus logically excludes belief in God" (Wells 1996).

Others, both believers and non-believers, rejected this conclusion that Darwinism is essentially atheistic. Just down the road from the Princeton seminary, James McCosh, the new president of the college that is now Princeton University, rejected Hodge's conclusion. McCosh found Darwin's evidence for the transmutation of species and for natural selection as the mechanism of evolution to be convincing and thought that Christians should be prepared to accept evolution as a fact. Contra Hodge, he did not see Darwin's account of biological change as any more atheistic or any more of a threat to Christian belief than Newton's theory of gravitation. He argued that both natural selection and universal gravitation were but examples of natural laws that carried out the will of their ultimate creator (Gundlach 1997).[5] If God is its creator, on what basis, after all, could one assume that gravity is a purposeless process as Hodge did?

Theistic evolution is the general term for compatibilist positions, encompassing any view that accepts the truth of evolutionary science and does not see this as necessarily opposed to belief in God. The term itself is not ideal as it is easily misunderstood to mean that God intervenes to guide evolution, which is not what theistic evolutionists, who are concerned to defend a religious view that is fully compatible with scientific methods and findings, have in mind. Theistic evolution comes in many theological variations and has been promoted under different names.[6]

Catholic writers on the subject, such as biologist Kenneth Miller (1999) and theologian John Haught (2010), just think of this as part of their Catholic tradition. In 1950, Pope Pius XII wrote in an encyclical that there is no intrinsic

5 McCosh did hold back from accepting human evolution as he thought that the fossil evidence for that was insufficient and he believed that human consciousness was unique. Today, with fossil and molecular evidence of human evolution well established, theistic evolutionists readily grant the evolution of human beings from other animal forms.

6 See Ruse (2001) for a historical and philosophical discussion of theistic evolution and other theological views about the relationship of Darwinism to Christianity.

conflict between Catholic theology and the theory of evolution, provided that God was still seen as creator of the world and of the immortal souls of every individual. Given that the soul is taken to be metaphysically distinct from the natural world, the latter is beyond the realm of a science that operates under the presumption of methodological naturalism.[7] Acceptance of Darwinian evolution is commonplace among mainstream Protestant denominations as well, and many religious scientists have explained why they see no conflict between their faith and evolutionary science. Reformed Christian physicist Howard J. Van Til, for example, used the term "creationomic" and the idea of a fully "gifted" creation to express the idea of a creation governed by laws that were sufficient to produce the features of the world that science investigates (Van Til 1986). Geneticist and physician Francis Collins, who was the second director of the Human Genome Project, explained his conception of how Darwinian evolution and Christian faith can fit together as "BioLogos" and founded a Christian advocacy group by that name to promote a compatibilist view (Collins 2006). BioLogos is a form of what is called "evolutionary creation," holding that evolution should be understood as a mode of creation. One even finds the theistic evolution position being promoted among evangelical Christians. Geologist Keith B. Miller, for example, advocated for this kind of view of an evolving creation and published a collection of writings of other evangelical Christians who argue for this as well (Miller 2003). Christian minister and writer Michael Dowd articulates an ecumenical evolutionary theology that has found supporters from a wide range of religious traditions (Dowd 2007).

It is ironic that some atheists join hands with IDCs in rejecting theistic evolution. Jerry Coyne, an evolutionary biologist who also advocates for atheism, is representative of this sort of view.

> "THEISTIC EVOLUTION" IS A BASTARD HYBRID OF THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE, AND ACCEPTS THE PRESENCE OF THE SUPERNATURAL AS PART OF BIOLOGY'S MOST IMPORTANT THEORY. WE SHOULD NOT SEE THEISTIC EVOLUTIONISTS AS BIG FANS OF SCIENCE. WE SHOULD SEE THEM AS PEOPLE WHO *WANT* TO BE SEEN AS SCIENCE-FRIENDLY, BUT CAN'T LET GO OF THEIR COMFORTING SUPERSTITIONS.
>
> (Coyne 2017; emphasis in original)

7 It is unclear how someone who thinks that science is not restricted in that way and may countenance supernatural entities would incorporate souls into a testable theory. Put another way, the weighing of souls is an issue of divine judgment, not anything that could be accomplished by weighing a body before and after death to determine whether there is a difference which, again, would beg the question by naturalizing the concept.

To be fair, Coyne was reacting to the way that theistic evolution was defined in a British survey as evolution thought of as "a process guided by God," which does suggest that evolution incorporates a supernatural element as part of the process.[8] I cannot say that no theists have considered things in this way, but it is quite opposite to the usual meaning of the term, at least in the literature regarding the debate between creationism and evolution.

One may see this clearly in the way that creationists adamantly reject theistic evolution. IDC leader Dembski states their view with almost as much force as Coyne, though with a very different conception of what the term means: "*Design theorists are no friends of theistic evolution*. As far as design theorists are concerned, theistic evolution is American evangelicalism's ill-conceived accommodation to Darwinism" (Dembski 1995, 3; emphasis in original). IDCs hold that no natural process can produce design without intelligence and that intelligence is necessarily supernatural. They reject the possibility that God could have created natural laws – whether Darwin's law of evolution by natural selection or any alternative – that could produce biological complexity, which is the standard theistic evolution position.

Conclusion

What we may say in conclusion is that in the debate between theists and atheists we are still far from reaching any conclusion. Creationist attacks on evolution and the place of evolution in the general cultural debate are not likely to be soon resolved, and neither is the philosophical and theological debate. Darwinism has taken us only a step or so beyond where David Hume ended the conversation in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hume 1779). Darwin provided the solution to the problem of biological adaptations that Philo had no good natural explanation of, but this hardly exhausts Cleanthes' arguments for theism. Nor can the atheist deploy Darwinism against Demea, who articulates the idea of divine mystery most clearly in the dialogue. It remains a separate philosophical issue whether such a view of God can be "made sense of," but that is of no interest to religious believers who hold that God is not only immaterial but

8 This is a long-standing problem in surveys about public attitudes about evolution and creationism, dating back at least as far as the early 1980s when Gallup started collecting data using an instrument that conflated theistic evolution with a non-scientific notion of divinely guided evolution and which defined evolution atheistically in the way that we have seen is problematic. The ongoing use of this sort of invalid instrument continues to cause confusion.

ineffable. Again, this sort of question is a theological issue that theists and atheists will continue to debate.

One person who, by faith and grace, believes in God and a Creation gifted by natural laws may see Darwinism as fitting comfortably in their worldview. Another person, who thinks it philosophically unjustified to take on a metaphysical belief in God, intervening or not, if it is not necessary, may conclude, like Laplace, that "I have no need of that hypothesis" after recognizing Darwinism's solution to the problem of biological design. Others may decide that Darwin's bulldog himself, Thomas Huxley, was right that, for the scientist, a principled agnosticism is the appropriate stance. In this sense, Darwinian evolution is no different from any other science.

As for whether there is any special import of Darwinism to issues of atheism, it is fitting to give the last word to someone who is closest to being able to give an authoritative answer, namely Darwin himself. Responding in a letter to the religious skeptic John Fordyce, who had inquired about his views regarding atheism, Darwin wrote:

> [My] judgment often fluctuates. Moreover, whether a man deserves to be called a theist depends on the definition of the term . . . In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. – I think that generally (and more and more so as I grow older), but not always, – that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind. (Darwin 1879)

As to the general conceptual question, Darwin thought it absurd that an evolutionist could not also be an ardent theist. In another letter, replying to a query from Mary Boole as to whether his theory of natural selection was inconsistent with belief in a personal God and various related matters, Darwin replied:

> I cannot see how the belief that all organic beings including man have been genetically derived from some simple being, instead of having been separately created bears on your difficulties. – These as it seems to me, can be answered only by widely different evidence from Science. (Darwin 1866)

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38

Literature

ANDREW TATE

Introduction

'I don't believe in God, but I miss Him', observes the novelist and critic Julian Barnes in *Nothing to be Frightened Of*, a rather melancholy memoir that explores the ways in which theism seems to be both impossible and persistent in late modernity (2009, 1). Literature in English has a long and complicated relationship with non-belief. Barnes' oxymoronic longing for a deity in whom belief is no longer sustainable is symptomatic of a very long-standing tradition of sorrowful scepticism. Indeed, J. Hillis Miller famously argues that '[p]ost-medieval literature records, among other things, the gradual withdrawal of God from the world' (1975, 1). The ways in which this 'gradual withdrawal' is registered by writers takes on a variety of different forms that include polemical anti-theism, agnostic uncertainty, and writing that expresses a more anxious sense that, in Miller's words, God 'no longer inheres in the world as the force binding together all men and all things … and can only be experienced negatively, as a terrifying absence' (1975, 2).

Many writers who have challenged traditional forms of theism are not necessarily either irreligious or anti-theistic. The visionary artist-poet, William Blake, for example, proclaimed the necessity of creating his own 'System' – essentially, a way of seeing the world – because the alternative was to be 'enslav'd by another Man's' (1991, 144). Blake's work playfully and provocatively inverts traditional religious ideas of heaven and hell and God and the devil in order to defamiliarize what he understood as the abuse of spirituality by the powerful as a means of social control. His work, however, is far from faithless. By contrast, other writers have articulated a far milder form of scepticism that might have more devastating consequences for theism. 'I do not believe in Belief', writes E. M. Forster in an essay that celebrates the creative potential of tolerance and human sympathy in opposition to dogma and creeds (1939, 5). For James Wood, novelist, critic

and sceptic, '[l]iterary and philosophical atheism moves between a rather charming serenity and a spirit of gauntlet throwing naughtiness' and can appear to be rather 'underpowered' (1999, 298–9). Wood, who has also explored the experience of faithlessness in his tragicomic novel *The Book Against God*, suggests that it was not the serene critiques of religion by self-confessed sceptics such as David Hume, Stendhal, or Bertrand Russell who pushed him towards atheism. Instead, the questions of 'believers, actual Christians', and in particular Fydor Dostoevsky, who 'offer the very deepest objections to their own belief' (1999, 299). In his recent history of atheism, the theologian Gavin Hyman observes that '[w]hen God is understood to be an object of thought, then God is created in the image of humanity. God comes to be conceived in human terms, his transcendence is domesticated' (2010, xvii). The challenge that many atheist writers face is that the god (or God) that they repudiate is one that takes on the shifting forms of the human imagination and whose adaptability is difficult to overcome.

This chapter will explore a diverse body of literary sceptics from the romantic era of the early 1800s to a late flowering of twenty-first-century 'New Atheist' authors via the anguish and protest atheism of a number of Victorian writers. Literature in English, particularly in the wake of the nineteenth-century intellectual challenges of Darwin, Marx, and Nietzsche, is frequently a threshold space in which belief in a whole variety of orthodoxies can be challenged. However, as Terry Eagleton has drily observed, 'atheism is by no means as easy as it looks' (2014, viii).

'There Is No God!': Romantic Rebellions

In 1811, a promising young poet with a predilection for subversive politics was excluded from University College, Oxford, for refusing to deny that he had written a provocative pamphlet called 'The necessity of atheism'. This defiant undergraduate was Percy Bysshe Shelley. The essay, co-written by Thomas Hogg, is a footnote in the history of atheism, but a significant one in the narrative of literary expressions of non-belief. In a post-Christian era, it is difficult to imagine a Britain in which public refutations of theological orthodoxy might have such significant consequences. Yet the young poet's expulsion from Oxford was symptomatic of the determining influence that the established church had on almost every institution long into the nineteenth century.

Shelley's atheism, shaped by the sceptical arguments of, among others, Hume, Locke, and Voltaire, and complicated by an evolving spirituality, has

been very thoroughly documented (Scrivener 1982; Priestman 1999; Jager 2010). However, his rebellion against creedal, dogmatic religion did not preclude belief in an animating, universal spirit or in concepts that resonate with the ideas of Jesus. Alongside his critique of traditional apologia for belief in an omnipotent creator, as one scholar has noted, Shelley's 'rejection of God was a desire to provoke orthodox believers: a defiance fired by anger at the perceived injustices and untruths disseminated by Christianity' (Garrett 2013, 15).

Queen Mab (1813), Shelley's controversial first long poem, returns to some of the ideas expressed in 'The necessity of atheism' and explores via dream vision and fairy tale the injustices of the past and present, compared with a coming utopia. The nine-canto 'philosophical poem', accompanied by prose annotations, is unambiguous in its critique of religion and in its defence of the integrity of atheism. Canto 7, for example, includes the story of 'an atheist burned' who faces an 'insensate mob' with quiet courage, sent to his death for proclaiming that 'There is no God' (l. 13; Shelley 2016, 64). The fairy speaker, perhaps an avatar of Shelley's hope for highly advanced, virtuous humanity, denounces the multiple ways in which the invocation of divinity is used to mask the most egregious wrongdoing by the supposedly godly:

> The name of God
> Has fenced about all crime with holiness,
> Himself the creature of his worshippers,
> Whose names and attributes and passions change,
> Seeva, Buddh, Foh, Jehovah, God, or Lord,
> Even with the human dupes who build his shrines,
> Still serving o'er the war-polluted world
> For desolation's watchword. (ll. 26–33; Shelley 2016, 64)

God, according to this perspective, is made in the image of 'his worshippers' rather than vice versa, and the devout, far from being enlightened, are merely self-deceived 'human dupes'. This kind of religiosity is represented as a travesty of human virtue rather than a reliable guide to earthly goodness. There is a strong streak of anticlericalism in the poem, something that Shelley shared even with more conservative British writers of the period:

> And priests dare babble of a God of peace,
> Even whilst their hands are red with guiltless blood,
> Murdering the while, uprooting every germ
> Of truth, exterminating, spoiling all,
> Making the earth a slaughter-house! (ll. 44–8; Shelley 2016, 64)

Shelley's romantic brand of atheism is not unique, though its fire and frankness were rare, even among British writers who were inspired by the energies of post-revolutionary European thought.

Atheism in mid-nineteenth-century American literature is relatively rare, though many writers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville articulated nuanced critiques of conventional forms of religious practice. Emerson famously demanded that American citizens deserved an 'original relation to the universe', one that was not dependent on old, European ways of thinking about life, the universe, and everything, including an undue reverence for antiquated forms of religious dogma. This former Unitarian minister pushed his readers to embrace the idea that nothing should be sacred save for their own belief without the limits of a priesthood or specific form of ecclesiology. Nevertheless, Emerson retained a belief in what he named the 'over soul', a non-doctrinaire synonym for the deity.

Almost sixty years after the Enlightenment ideals of the independence proclamation of 1776 and its extension in the constitution, both of which emphasized freedom from religious persecution, American writers still frequently wrestled with the legacies of their Puritan precursors. Although the theocratic authority of these zealous settlers reached a ruinous climax in the late seventeenth century with the paranoia and violence of the infamous Salem witch trials, aspects of their ideals persisted for many generations. For Sacvan Bercovitch, the single most important gift of these radical, reforming Protestants 'to subsequent American culture lies not in theology or logic or social institutions, but in the realm of the imagination' (1974, 7). This Puritan inheritance manifests itself not only in the intellectual and ethical seriousness of theologically rich but open-minded writers such as Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne, but also in the more subversive and dissident poetry of Emily Dickinson (1830–86). This audacious writer was raised in Amherst, Massachusetts in an atmosphere that was highly charged with the rhetoric of the so-called 'Second Great Revival', a renewal of the religious fervour of Calvinist believers. Dickinson resisted the pressure to conform to this wave of revitalized piety during her teenage years, both at school and at home. Her teachers, peers, and family were ready to speak of their conversions, to give testimony to God and thanks for assurances of eternal salvation. Yet the young poet quietly rebelled against this renewed religious conservatism by refusing to acquiesce to a specific form of belief or church identity. Superficially, this seditious approach to organized religion suggests that Dickinson was wholly different from her artistic forebear, Anne Bradstreet, the first published poet of the New World. However, like Bradstreet and her

Puritan contemporaries, Dickinson was steadfast in resisting the demands to obey social expectations; she, in common with these Calvinists, was determined to forge her own spiritual and artistic path.

She read the Bible voraciously, but also refers to it as an 'antique Volume / Written by Faded men / At the suggestion of Holy Spectres' (ll. 1–3; Dickinson 2016, 644). Dickinson might be thought of as a romantic individualist, not least of all in terms of her defiant, non-doctrinaire, and, perhaps, irreligious spirituality. Her spiritual journey and its relationship with the poems is a matter of vivid contention (Burbick 1980; New 1986; Lundin 2004). 'Of her own religious faith, virtually anything may be said, with some show of evidence', Denis Donoghue has famously observed. The poet could be read as 'agnostic, a heretic, a skeptic, a Christian' (1969, 11).

The ways in which she represents God in her writing, both public and private, is often mischievous. She was a solitary religious outsider, and, perhaps, a slightly reluctant non-convert, in a world of domestic devotion to the Christian God.

Dickinson's poetry questions orthodoxy in an acerbic manner. This short poem is typical of Dickinson's subversive approach to spirituality, but it is also uncommonly direct:

> 'Faith' is a fine invention
> For Gentlemen who *see!*
> But Microscopes are prudent
> In an Emergency! (ll. 1–4; Dickinson 2016, 87).

In another poem (and one of the few published during her lifetime), Dickinson's speaker distances themselves from conventional piety by refusing to participate in regular acts of public worship:

> Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
> I keep it, staying at Home –
> With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
> And an Orchard, for a Dome – (ll. 1–4; Dickinson 2016, 153)

Dickinson's scepticism is not simply a hard-headed atheism or even a keen rationalism. For example, her work often explores the threshold state between life and death in poems that suggest the continuation of consciousness in another realm.

In a number of Dickinson's poems, her speaker seeks God only to meet silence or apparent indifference. In poem 376, for example, written circa 1862, she reflects,

Of Course – I prayed –
And did God Care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird – had stamped her foot –
And cried 'Give Me' –
My Reason – (ll. 1–6; Dickinson 2016, 179)

God appears not to honour the prayerful words of the devout or, in the words of Roger Lundin, the poem represents prayer 'as a gesture as futile as that of a bird stamping her foot in the air' (2004, 150). In another poem on a similar theme, probably written in the same year ('My period had come for Prayer –/ No other Art would do' (ll. 1–2; Dickinson 2016, 274), the transcendence of God is signified by invisibility, spatial metaphors ('God grows above') and inscrutability:

Had'st Thou no Face
That I might look on Thee?
The Silence condescended –
Creation stopped – for Me –
But awed beyond my errand –
I worshipped – did not 'pray' –
(ll. 15–20; Dickinson 2016, 275)

Lundin registers Dickinson's acute defiance of religious orthodoxy, but also confidently claims that, in common with Fyodor Dostoevsky, 'she won her way through doubt to a tenuous but genuine faith' (2004, 151). Dickinson is able to register awe but not prayer as a dialogue between creator and created. This absence of a reciprocal dialogue became a key feature in the sceptical literature of the nineteenth century.

'Wandering Between Two Worlds': Varieties of Victorian (Un)belief

God did not die in Victorian Britain, but many writers were concerned that the deity may not be terribly interested in speaking to modern humanity. The era was, in many ways, more profoundly religious than certain strands of secularization theory have claimed, and a number of scholars now make a case for its religious dynamism (Brown 2001; Larsen 2006). Tennyson famously wrote of 'honest doubt'; Charles Dickens had a profound faith but was vividly critical of institutional religion throughout his fiction. Matthew Arnold – school inspector, literary critic, and poet – was an early advocate

of a kind of aesthetic Christianity, one shorn of its now untenable supernatural promises but which might, in his terms, still be a source of sweetness and light against the forces of anarchy. In 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse' (1855), Arnold narrates the encounter between an agnostic, or at least spiritually equivocal speaker, and the Carthusians, an ancient monastic order, at their 'world-famed home'. The sceptical speaker is nostalgic for a world in which the order and security offered by such religious committed was available but recognizes that its era has died. The present, he suggests, is a kind of spiritual threshold:

> Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
> The other powerless to be born,
> With nowhere yet to rest my head,
> Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.
> Their faith, my tears, the world deride –
> I come to shed them at their side.

One critic has described Arnold as 'the quintessential displaced person, suffering from an utter personal, theological, and historical homelessness' (Shaw 1987, 122). His theological liberalism is made complicated by his profound social conservatism. Indeed, he seems to advocate religious ideas, even if proved false, because they might ensure social order and, with it, a hierarchy. He also suggested that poetry would assume the vital role formerly played by religious belief in sustaining a vivid interior life and in focusing the human yearning to believe in something more than ordinary material concerns. Poetry might, in this sense, become a secular salvation. Arnold's 'Dover Beach', written as early as 1851 but not published until 1867 – a number of years after both Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and the advent of the sceptical 'higher criticism' of the Bible – embodies this sense of religious yearning by a writer who no longer believed in a transcendent God. The defining motif in the poem is tidal: the speaker looks out from the cliffs of England as if onto the furthest edges of the world and gazes on the 'Sea of Faith' which '[w]as once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore / Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled' (ll. 21–3). This comforting visual image is replaced by a disconcerting auditory encounter:

> But now I only hear
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
> Retreating, to the breath
> Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world. (ll. 24–8)

As Rupert Shortt notes, the poem's key simile is 'ill-chosen', especially if he intended to be indicative of theism's inevitable demise, 'because tides turn' (2016, 93). However, the poem has become something like a secular hymn for sceptics who miss the aura of belief in a transcendent and loving personal God. In the 1980s, the radical theologian Don Cupitt presented a documentary series that mapped the shifts in godless Christianity, named *The Sea of Faith*. Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) features an extraordinary – and perhaps preposterous – sequence in which a violent criminal is dissuaded from continuing an already horrendous act by a verbatim reading, from memory, of Arnold's poem. In a trenchant critique of Arnold's peaceable, rather complacent advocation of cultural, but resolutely non-supernatural, Christianity, Eagleton argues that he does not recognize that the 'relevance of religion to the masses might lie not in the need for political stability, but in the fact that the Jewish Bible presents Yahweh as a champion of the poor and powerless' (2014, 137). Arnold might have yearned for the old certainties that religion provided, but he did not suggest that they would ever return. However, he did believe that the working classes would struggle to play their role – obedient, dutiful, meek – in the existing social order if the moral framework of the church was removed. Religion as poetry was, it would seem, only available or desirable for the educated upper middle classes.

Far less irenic than the peaceable, if rather self-satisfied, Arnold, is John Ruskin. Ruskin (1819–1900), the polymathic, prolific, and provocative critic of art and society, was shaped by his mother's fervent evangelical piety and, for many years, an advocate of a rather militant Protestantism. However, long before he publicly distanced himself from such a sectarian, exclusivist approach to religion, he privately expressed anxiety about the very ground of evangelical Christianity, the historical veracity of the scriptures. In a letter to his friend, Dr Henry Acland, written in May 1851, he reflected on the threat that geology – a science that he had loved since childhood – represented to his faith:

> You speak of the Flimsiness of your own faith. Mine, which was never strong, is being beaten into mere gold leaf, and flutters in weak rags from the letter of its old forms; but the only letters it can hold by at all are the old Evangelical formulæ. If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses – and on the other side, these unhappy, blinking Puseyisms; men trying to do right and losing their very Humanity. (1909, 115)

The distaste for 'blinking Puseyisms' reflects a rather factional intolerance for the High Church wing of the Anglican communion, then particularly associated with the so-called Oxford Movement of Edmund Pusey. Although he never became an atheist, Ruskin's personal anguish, almost a decade before the challenge represented by the publication of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection, exemplifies the difficulties that Christians had in reconciling their powerful, culturally enshrined religious beliefs with the evidence of the new science.

George Eliot (1819–80), probably the most articulate non-believer in the British literary canon, like Ruskin, was raised in a devout household. As a young woman, she was similarly committed to an evangelical reverence for scripture, justification by faith, and righteous social action. Eliot's orthodox faith was radically challenged, if not shattered, by her encounter with German biblical tradition. Indeed, she is a vital element in the British reception history of the demythologizing movement of this approach to revealed religion. Before her long and distinguished career as a novelist, she translated David Friedrich Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeit* (1835–6) as *The Life of Jesus* (1846) and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841) as *The Essence of Christianity* (1854). She later championed a version of Feuerbach's concept of the 'religion of humanity' and her vast body of writing, far from embodying a polemical atheism, emphasizes the value of religious practice as a necessary imaginative projection of human value and meaning in mythical terms that need not be understood literally. Hodgson counters the popular assumption that Eliot 'was a nonbeliever who used religion to achieve certain aesthetic, psychological, political, or moral effects' (Hodgson 2001, 1–3).

Few nineteenth-century writers are as theologically informed as Eliot, a writer whose fiction and criticism are committed to an unambiguously moral pursuit of the truth, however unattractive that reality may prove to be. 'Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult', reflects the narrator of *Adam Bede* (1859), Eliot's first novel, noting, in a distinctively metafictional paragraph, that writers are tempted to euphemize and to aestheticize everyday life: 'Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth' (2008, 160). Although *Adam Bede* and its successors were published after Eliot had experienced her powerful unconversion from transcendent Christianity, it demonstrates a profound respect for vital religion at its most authentic: Dinah Morris, an itinerant Methodist preacher, is the embodiment of personal and spiritual integrity, and the titular Adam, as down-to-earth as his biblical name suggests, represents a spirituality that is rooted in everyday acts of kindness

and justice. Eliot's displaced evangelicalism underwrote conversion-centred narratives of loss and figurative rebirth, including the fable-like *Silas Marner* (1861), in which the eponymous misanthrope, whose faith in God is ruined by the bad faith of his fellow believers, discovers his sense of humanity via a reconnection to community.

In her exploration of the impact of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory on the novel, Gillian Beer notes that 'fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century was particularly seeking sources of authoritative organisation which could substitute for the god-like omnipotence and omniscience open to the theistic narrator' (2000, 149). *Middlemarch* (1870–1) is an embodiment of this intellectual and formal struggle: in many ways the zenith of the Victorian realist project, Eliot's rich, multi-plot novel – an evocation of a fictitious English midlands town set in the three years immediately before the first Great Reform Act (1832) – explores, among other issues, the impact of national democratic changes, the legal status of women, and medical and scientific discovery on the interconnected inner lives of a vast *dramatis personae*. Eliot addresses the spiritual difficulty of living after the age of 'guiding visions and spiritual directors' (Eliot 1998, 84–5). The question of whether belief in God (or gods) is possible in the new era, one of mechanization, bureaucracy, and the end of old ecclesiastical hierarchies, informs the whole novel and especially the narrative arc of its central protagonist. Dorothea Brooke is an ascetic and devout young woman, committed to improving the lives of others, but, as the novel's prelude suggests, she is born in an era that will not allow her to be the same kind of reforming, long-remembered figure as Saint Theresa. Her first husband, a cerebral, unworldly, but quietly spiteful clergyman, is defeated in his own scholarly theological quest to discover a 'key to all mythologies'. A post-Enlightenment world, suggests Eliot, might be ever more legible but it cannot be accommodated by the watertight theological certainties of a mythic past. In lieu of the supposed heroic or 'epic' existence open to the saints of previous centuries, Dorothea's quietly self-sacrificial, 'faithfully lived' time on earth will improve the world without being remembered 'for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts' (Eliot 1998, 822). The writer suggests that the novel, in the absence of the hope of resurrection or union with God, might memorialize such rarely remembered lives.

Eliot registers the impact of scientific and sceptical challenges to Christian orthodoxy but retains a sense that religious practice is frequently a benign and necessary element in building a compassionate society. She had a strong conviction in the ethical power of authentic belief: 'I have too profound a

conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with No-faith, to have any negative propagandism in me' (cited in Qualls, 2001, 119).

Other late nineteenth-century writers, however, are considerably less sanguine, particularly in the way in which they register the spectre of Darwinism. Mark Twain (born Samuel Langhorne Clemons), most famous for his sequence of adventure tales featuring Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, wrote a number of theologically acerbic takes on the story of Adam, Eve, and the temptation, and also challenged the popular Christian assumptions of his era (Wright 2007). In one passage, included in his posthumously published autobiography, Twain offers a vividly scathing reflection on the concept of humanity as the apogee of creation:

> Concerning Man – he is too large a subject to be treated as a whole; so I will merely discuss a detail or two of him at this time. I desire to contemplate him from this point of view … that he was not made for any useful purpose, for the reason that he hasn't served any; that he was most likely not even made *intentionally;* and that his working himself up out of the oyster bed to his present position was probably a matter of surprise and regret to the Creator … For his history, in all climes, all ages and all circumstances, furnishes oceans and continents of proof that of all creatures that were made he is the most detestable. Of the entire brood he is the only one – the solitary one – that possesses malice. (Twain 2010, 312)

Twain appears to be scathing not just of the deity, but also of humanity as a species for believing in such a creator. Thomas Hardy's fiction chronicles what he names, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891–2), the 'ache of modernism' and, in the same novel, his narrator is scornful of a distant but perhaps vindictive deity, the 'President of the Immortals', who uses the titular heroine as mere sport. This allusion to classical mythology is not a covert return to polytheism. Hardy's fiction resonates most strongly with Georg Lukács' frequently quoted description of the novel as 'the epic of a world abandoned by God' (1971, 88). How do writers respond to this apparent neglect or desertion of the deity?

'The Anger with God': New Atheist Novelists

What might it mean to believe in the existence of God but to deny that the divine being is worthy of worship? This is the idea at the heart of Bernard Schweitzer's exploration of what he terms 'Misotheism', the idea of a principled hatred of God, an ethical protest against a divinity who allows suffering

and refuses to intervene in the horrendous injustices of human history. In a short, acerbic introduction to the Book of Job – a dark fable of Jewish wisdom literature that follows the consequences of a wager by a character named Satan (the adversary) and God – the novelist Louis De Bernières reflects on the injustice of the story and its theological implications:

> Not only do we have a God … who is a frivolous trickster, but one who even botches up the reparations when He decides to make them. There are many episodes in the Bible that show God in a very bad light, such as when he commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, or when He commands Saul to destroy the Amalekites … and one cannot but conclude from them either that God is a mad, bloodthirsty, and capricious despot, or that all this time we have been inadvertently worshipping the Devil. (De Bernières 2005, 96)

The idea that the God and Devil of Christian orthodoxy might easily be swapped has a long critical lineage. 'I think the traditional God of Christianity very wicked, and have done since I was at school', wrote William Empson in his study of the Puritan poet, John Milton (1965, 10–11). He develops this idea further and argues that, still worse than Milton's God, is the deity of the Bible and Christian theology. 'The Christian God the Father', claims Empson, 'the God of Tertullian, Augustine and Aquinas, is the wickedest thing yet invented by the black heart of man' (1965, 72, 250). Empson's angry rejection of Christian thought anticipates the turn towards religious questions from a kind of piously irreligious perspective of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century writers. The so-called 'New Atheism' of polemical sceptics, most famously the 'four horsemen of the non-apocalypse', Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, has brought disbelief back into popular focus. For Schweizer, the strident sceptics known as 'New Atheists' 'should really be called the "new antithesists"' because they 'take aim at theistic religion in general, rather than at the existence of God alone' (2011, 11). The various strengths and notable intellectual limits of New Atheist discourse have been widely debated (Beattie 2007; Eagleton 2009). Whatever their worldview, these atheist activists have a literary equivalent that may, in truth, be more widely read. This phenomenon has been identified as 'New Atheist' fiction with Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, and Philip Pullman as its key figures (Bradley and Tate 2010).

Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000), ostensibly aimed at young adult readers, is a sophisticated rewriting of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), an epic in which the Puritan poet seeks to 'justify the ways of God to man'. The sequence rather self-consciously displays the legacies of romantic responses

to Milton's theodicy and, in particular, William Blake's widely quoted observation that the Puritan was 'a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it' (Milton 2005, 8). The series was not just controversial because of its strongly anticlerical stance. The two young protagonists, Lyra and Will, drawn together from parallel versions of Oxford, are given the task of defeating the malevolent 'Authority', the alleged creator and dictator of all of these different versions of reality. They are, in fact, given the job of killing God. The fact that this divinity is an impostor – a vain being who simply took on the mantle to ensure his own power – is significant. However, the moment in which the two children end the life of this being – represented as senescent and barely conscious – symbolizes that the end of faith in an eternal creator is necessary and overdue. The act itself, in which the Authority simply crumbles and vanishes, is represented as a kind of mercy killing.

One character, who begins the trilogy as a devout, if self-seeking agent of the 'Authority' as his sinister church, the Magisterium, becomes an articulate advocate against the whole notion of divine omnipotence:

> Well, where is God … if he's alive? And why doesn't he speak any more? At the beginning of the world, God walked in the garden and spoke with Adam and Eve. Then he began to withdraw, and Moses only heard his voice. Later, in the time of Daniel, he was aged – he was the Ancient of Days … Is he still alive, at some inconceivable age, decrepit and demented, unable to think or act or speak and unable to die, a rotten hulk? And if that is his condition, wouldn't it be the most merciful thing, the truest proof of our love for God, to seek him out and give him the gift of death? (Pullman 2001, 344–5)

I have previously argued that the sequence reads as a kind of fantastical meditation on one of Nietzsche's most provocative theological questions: 'Is man only God's mistake or God only man's mistake?' (Nietzsche 1990, 33; Bradley and Tate 2010). However, as audacious as the trilogy might be in its critique of theism, it is not universally disapproved of by Christian apologists and, indeed, it found a surprising defender in the figure of the orthodox theologian, Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury. Williams offered a nuanced critique of this contemporary epic but also praised Pullman for his richly ethical exploration of belief and the damaging nature of falsehood, and suggested that it might be appreciated by believers (Williams 2004).

Salman Rushdie differs from the majority of the writers discussed in this chapter in that his mode of literary disbelief does not emerge from a

repudiation of a specifically Christian heritage. He is the author, however, of the most famously theologically controversial novel of the late twentieth century: *The Satanic Verses* (1988) was accused of blasphemy for the way in which it represents aspects of the life of the Prophet Mohammed. The 'Rushdie Affair' became a ferocious international episode that moved beyond a simple debate about censorship and artistic freedom to include public book burnings and a fatwa that was imposed on the author in 1989 by Ayatollah Khomeini of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Malik 2009; Weller 2009). The novel itself is a magical realist exploration of the migrant experience, religious identity, and the complexity of selfhood in the postmodern and postcolonial era. Its exploration of faith, though controversial, is serious and thoughtful. Rushdie has commented that although he is not 'a religious man', he recognizes the significance and value of belief to the extent that he wished, in the novel, to develop a narrative mode that would not simply undermine a spiritual worldview: 'A form must be created which allows the miraculous and the mundane to coexist at the same level – as the same order of event' (Rushdie 1992, 376). One of the central plot strands of the novel anticipates Schweitzer's concept of misotheism when Gibreel Farishta – a film actor who is celebrated for his performances as a variety of deities – loses his lifelong faith after a debilitating illness. He is astonished that the God in whom he has always believed has apparently abandoned him to suffer and becomes defined by a rage against the divine, an 'anger with God' which 'carried him through another day but then it faded and in its place there came a terrible emptiness … On that day of metamorphosis the illness changed and his recovery began.' He defines his new life by the desperate desire 'to prove to himself the non-existence of God' (Rushdie 1988, 30). The novel is irreverent, but it does not simply dismiss belief or believing communities.

If Rushdie's later fiction, especially *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), with its exploration of 'the quarrel over God', offers a more nuanced and sympathetic account of the interior lives of believers, he has, nonetheless, remained a trenchant critic of religion in general and theism in particular (2008, 347). In '"Imagine there's no heaven": a letter to the six billionth world citizen' (Hitchens 2007), the author reflects that 'the newest member of a notoriously inquisitive species' is likely to be 'strongly encouraged to imagine a heaven with at least one god in residence' (Hitchens 2007, 380). Rushdie's polemical language presents religion, in all its diversity, as connected in error ('This, finally, is what all religions have in common. They didn't get it right' (Hitchens 2007, 381)). Belief in sacred books, especially those that claim divine authorship, he suggests, is something to be actively resisted, a form of

defiance that will liberate: 'To choose unbelief is to choose mind over dogma, to trust in our humanity instead of all these dangerous divinities' (Hitchens 2007, 382). The title of Rushdie's epistle to an anonymous future child is an allusion to John Lennon's song 'Imagine' (1971), perhaps the most popular declaration of the virtues of non-belief. The letter echoes the former Beatle's utopian dream of freedom from modes of doctrine that both see as divisive. Rushdie implores this new human being to reject the allegedly immutable claims of holy texts ('ancient wisdoms are modern nonsenses') in favour of a humanizing, non-dogmatic celebration of reason. In some ways, the elevation of reason takes on a quasi-religious status.

For Eagleton, modernity was always religious, despite its loud protestations: the Enlightenment did not really kill God but merely gave him a 'series of majestic new names, like Nature, Man, Reason, History, Power, Desire, and so on. Rather than dismantling the whole outdated apparatus of metaphysics and theology, we have simply given it a new content' (2007, 30). Rushdie and Pullman, for example, critique traditional monotheism in their fiction but both writers are informed by a kind of irreverent humanist spirituality, one that reads religious mythologies as sources of wisdom if they are not regarded as authoritative or sacred texts that demand obedience and worship.

Contemporary literature is capacious enough to represent both passionate faith and atheism with nuance and complexity. The secular age, as Charles Taylor famously terms it, recognizes that different ways of thinking about divinity are plausible or, at least, available (2007). Polemic and rage are, in many ways, the order of public discourse in the early twenty-first century. Literary culture, which demands deceleration, attentiveness, and reason, remains an alternative space in which the collision of belief and scepticism might occur in ways that are creative and liberating.

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39
Music

PAUL WATT

In many respects, music and atheism might seem to be strange bedfellows, given the religious – or at least metaphysical – language that often shapes accounts of musical experiences. For centuries, music has been attributed with the power to calm and restore order and equilibrium in times of trouble and turmoil. Shakespeare supposed music to be the food of love, while in the nineteenth century, Walter Pater (1919 [1873], 111) asserted that 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'.[1] This condition of music – its ability to somehow lift spirits and provide a sense of well-being – is reflected in such metaphysical and spiritual language. Moreover, the church paid for a very large proportion of music written by western classical composers, until the late classical period, that once tied music squarely to religion. Masses, requiems, motets, cantatas, and oratorios served religious themes and liturgical purposes. However, we cannot always assume that music for any function of the church was written by the hand of a believer, and atheism is known to have held a still wider sway in other musical circles, especially since the late nineteenth century.

For many music-lovers around the world, past and present, western classical music is a form of redemption, a pathway to truth. These themes were especially strong in the nineteenth century, but linger today.[2] Many musicians waxed lyrical about the religious and redemptive power of music. Liszt, for example, wrote 'transcendental études' and devoted a large part of his life to the priesthood. Wagner's layering of music effects in his opera dramas – word, poetry, drama – provided the basis of his idea of *Kunstreligion*, or art as religion. Indeed, the idea of music as religion goes back centuries – for example, various artworks depict Pope Gregory the Great transcribing or notating chant from a dove delivered by God. Since the nineteenth century,

1 The Shakespeare quote is from *Twelfth Night* (*c.* 1601).
2 This notion is eloquently explained by Ian Parsons (2019).

popular music – or music of the masses as it is sometimes called – has been ubiquitous. The musical world has changed dramatically. Popular music is no longer 'trivial', as the great German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus (1989, 311–12) termed the popular music genres.

This chapter considers the dramatic change in attitudes towards music from the early twentieth century to the present by drawing on personal accounts of atheists in the world of music to illustrate their lack of faith – or scepticism about faith – in their own words. It begins by considering previous attempts to identify composers and musicians who have articulated arguments for atheism. It then considers the career of various critics, including Joseph McCabe, Ernest Newman, Ernest Walker, and Neville Cardus, who, more by accident than design, challenged a commonplace view that the making and enjoyment of music is necessarily a spiritual or religious experience. The chapter then considers a series of detailed examples from later in the century – including Pete Seeger, Björk, and Larry Adler – whose disinterest in religion has been part and parcel of their working lives, but to varying degrees in sometimes unclear, inconsistent, and conflicting ways.

Only a small number of works have attempted to quantify and explain the extent of atheist ideology in music. One such study is Joseph McCabe's *Biographical Dictionary of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Freethinkers* (1945). McCabe (1866–1945) was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1890 but abandoned his calling in 1896, becoming a freethinker. This biographical dictionary lists hundreds of eminent scientists, writers, women and men of literature, and philosophers, all of whom, according to McCabe, are unbelievers in some sense. Among McCabe's freethinkers are Aristotle, Bacon, Buddha, Auguste Comte, Confucius, Matthew Arnold, Herbert Spencer, Hippolyte Taine, and Nietzsche – in short, many of the most widely read and influential thinkers of the world. The list of composers in McCabe's volume is a long one: Beethoven, Berlioz, Bizet, Boito, Brahms, Cherubini, Debussy, Halevy, Herzogenberg, Mascagni, Massenet, Mozart, Paganini, Parry, Schubert, Schumann, Richard Strauss, Tchaikovsky, Verdi, and Wagner. Gounod is mentioned only in passing in the reference to the entry on Sarah Bernhardt. Of the dozens of critics and people of letters listed in the dictionary, a few musical critics are included: Avicenna, James Huneker, George Bernard Shaw, and J. A. Symonds. The only performer or conductor in McCabe's inventory is Sir Henry Wood.

McCabe's tone is defensive and combative. Despite his pretentions to rational thought, scientific method, and impartiality, his work in this catalogue of atheists relies at times on anecdote, and uncited references: in the

main, his evidence is often flimsy. Typical of McCabe's tone is his entry on Beethoven:

> The great musician was reared a Catholic but quit the Church and adopted Goethe's Pantheism. Although he composed a Catholic mass (*Missa solemnis*), which an authority described as 'perhaps the grandest piece of musical expression which art possesses', he remained a Pantheist to the end. It is piquant that the musical expert who thus appreciates his mass, Sir G. Macfarren, describes him as a 'freethinker' (in the *Imper. Dict. of Univ. Biog.*). Beethoven's most authoritative biographers are clear about his views on religion. When he was dying he yielded to the pressure of Catholic friends and let a priest administer his sacraments, but it is admitted that when the priest left the room he said, in the Latin words of the ancient Roman theater 'Applaud, my friends, the comedy is over.' One biographer very implausibly argues that he meant the comedy of his life. During the years of his full inspiration he had little religious feeling. When Felix Moscheles once scribbled on a manuscript 'With God's help,' Beethoven wrote, 'Man help thyself.'

A similar anecdotal and flimsy entry is recorded for Berlioz: 'Although he composed Catholic Church-music (*Te Deum*, *Mass of the Dead*, etc.) and is claimed in the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Berlioz often admits in his letters that he was an atheist. In K. F. Boult's *Life of Berlioz* (1903, 298) there is a letter written shortly before he died, in which he says: "I believe nothing".' For McCabe, his description of Gounod as simply 'the favorite composer of modern Catholics, was neurotic and inconsistent. He "vacillated between mysticism and voluptuousness," says one of his biographers.' McCabe was equally as cutting with Brahms: '*The Four Serious Songs* which he published before he died are described by one critic as his "supreme achievement in dignified utterance of noble thoughts." The words to the first, as a matter of fact, reject and almost ridicule the idea of personal immortality.' Yet, on occasion, McCabe was less bellicose, especially on Wagner:

> All admit that he was an atheist and radical – he took part in the revolution of 1848 – in the first part of his life but when he produced Parsifal in 1882 Nietzsche and others charged him with having lapsed in to mysticism. It is clear that he was then in a romantic and more or less mystic mood, but all experts admit that he never returned to the Christian faith. The chief writer on his religious ideas Otto Hartwich says: 'Wagner was a Christian in a large sense, though not a man of the Church. He had little taste for the other-worldly speculations of dogmatic theology and none at all in the Church's pressure on faith and conscience.' . . . The British musical critic and free-thinker Ernest Newman, who has a work on Wagner, reminds us that by the

> age of 50 all his greatest work had been done (while he was an atheist) and his intellectual powers were now less vigorous though his art was still great.

Much more recently, Paul A. Bertagnolli (2013) has discussed atheist musicians and composers from the sixteenth century to the present in the context of their works. While he has focused on some of the same composers as McCabe, including Berlioz and Bizet, Bertagnolli's interest is musical works that are imbued with themes of unbelief. In the case of Verdi, *Don Carlos* is a statement of the composer's criticism of the papacy. Fuller consideration here is given to Verdi's anticlericalism and Bizet's pantheism. Other musicians Bertagnolli canvasses are Frank Zappa and Chen Sheng. My attention, however, is on those writers and musicians who have described their atheism through prose.

Ernest Newman (1868–1959) was one of the world's most prolific and respected music critics and biographers in the first half of the century.[3] He wrote more than a dozen books and in excess of 2000 articles and reviews on all kinds of music. His favourite composers, on whom he wrote extensively, were Richard Strauss, Edward Elgar, Hector Berlioz, and Richard Wagner. Newman (1951) wrote that the 1951 performance of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth was one of the most religious experiences of his life. Yet Newman was an atheist, and had been for all his life. For Newman, and indeed thousands of people the world over, the aesthetic pleasure derived from music or any activity can be spiritual or meaningful without an association to god or gods. One does not have to be a person of any faith to be so affected.

Newman was raised an Anglican, but from all accounts it seems he was an atheist from his teenage years. He joined the Liverpool Branch of the National Secular Society (NSS) in the 1880s and for a time was its president. He met the key operators of the NSS: Charles Bradlaugh (editor of the *National Reformer*) and John M. Robertson, literary critic, economist, and editor of the *National Reformer*, after Bradlaugh's death. Under Robertson's guidance, Newman made his debut as a writer in the *National Reformer* and wrote blustery and angry articles on a range of social and literary topics. Very early on, Newman saw the world – and the arts – from a decidedly secular point of view. At one point (see below) he wrote of his frustration with the worldview of deriving meaning solely from the point of view of religion, complaining that ecclesiastical interpretations of art and society were at odds with the temper of the late nineteenth century. A devotee of the works of

3 On Newman's literary career, see Watt (2017).

Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte, and Charles Darwin (among others), Newman advocated, in his modest way, a change of interpretative tune.

In the 1920s, Henry George Farmer wrote a biography of Newman that concentrated on his years associated with the *National Reformer* and the freethought movement. It was not able to find a publisher because they were interested not in Newman's atheism but in his work as a music critic. Still, Farmer retained the manuscript for years, and shortly after Newman's death in 1959 Farmer contacted Newman's widow, Vera Newman, to apprise her of his plans to try once more to get the book published. But the book appalled Vera. She clearly had no idea about her husband's ingrained involvement with secularism in his formative years and, tellingly, wrote that she did not agree with Farmer that Newman's atheism was important to him: 'Ernest's passion all his life was music, and since I first knew him forty years ago, freethought and writing about it, or even discussing it, had no part in his life' (V. Newman 1960, quoted in Watt 2017). For Vera, and presumably many classical music-lovers of her generation, being an atheist and a lover of classical music were like oil and water. Yet for Ernest Newman they were not.

Influenced early in his career by the grand narratives of the nineteenth century, particularly positivism and Darwinism, Newman was a feisty freethinker. In his first article in the *National Reformer*, 'Morality and belief', Newman (1889) articulated the commonplace secular attitude that religious thought stood in opposition to 'enlightenment'. In Newman's view, religion was a stifling social construction and out of place in the contemporary world: 'In no sphere of life does the dead past live on so long as in the ecclesiastical. Ecclesiastical music, ecclesiastical art, ecclesiastical printing, ecclesiastical dress even, bear the stamp of an age other than the present' (E. Newman 1889). A new world order for Newman would be based on science, rationalism, and a rejection of religion.

Yet, there were some who were concerned that the idea of progress was a threat to society, hence a letter to the editor in *The Times* on 17 April 1919, advocating the establishment of a professorship in ecclesiastical music at King's College London. Clearly, the signatories to the letter were living in fear of a separation of church and state, as their letter implies. It was argued that the gain for music as well as the church would be significant and that the College would be a site of training and workshops for clergy post-ordination. Some readers of the letter were not convinced, as Ernest Walker was to write two years later in *Music & Letters* in an article titled 'Free thought and the musician' (1921). Walker (1921, 254) asserted that in the 1920s it was 'too late'

to try to argue that the church 'will always be the chief home and school of music and the people' as *The Times* letter suggested. Indeed, Walker argued that times had changed radically and the supremacy of particular spiritual ideas could hold sway no longer. He argued that with the composing and performance of such works as *Samson et Dalila*, *Salomé*, and secular concerts, the musical world had grown increasingly secular.

Walker was writing at a time when freethought in Britain had been remarkably influential for a generation and had been caught up in the process of what Owen Chadwick (1975) describes as the 'secularization of the European mind', brought about mainly by a trajectory of anticlericalism and a strong distance between the extremes of science and religion. It was in this milieu that the idea of music as a redemptive force also lost some of its sway. H. G. Schenk (1966), in his book on romanticism, very clearly paints a picture of the early romantic period, largely defining music and the arts in general as religions unto themselves: 'For [these artists] music partook of the very essence of religion: for some, indeed, it virtually became a religion.' He quotes George Sand describing music as 'that divine tongue', which would seem untenable to some musicians by the end of the twentieth century (Schenk 1966, 203).

While Ernest Newman was a firm atheist, his friend and colleague Neville Cardus was much more faint-hearted. By his own admission, Cardus was inspired to become a music critic after encountering Newman's writings as a youth, and Cardus, too, claimed to be a rationalist and freethinker along the same lines as Newman, in that he probably read freethought literature, and he was well acquainted with the literary and religious works of Charles Bradlaugh, John M. Robertson, and the French rationalist Emile Hennequin. These irreligious inspirations for his secular proclivities formed, it appears, a much shorter list than what Newman had read; however, Cardus declared he was not a believer. He did, however, believe in a godly power or presence of sorts – a kind a supernatural power invested in music.

Despite a shared interest in and influence from Robertson, and despite Cardus' deep respect for Newman's work, their approaches to music criticism were vastly different. Cardus described these polarities:

> I was blessed in my two teachers – Langford the Platonist, Ernest Newman the Aristotelean: Spirit of Affirmation and Spirit of Denial. Langford taught me to feel and translate, while Newman taught me to observe and analyse. Faust and Mephistopheles! – without these two working in harness, so to say, no man can hope really to know art or life. Langford was like the priest administering the sacrament, the body and blood of Beethoven; Newman

> was the sceptic who while he aesthetically savoured the ritual was alert of palate enough to know always if the wine were good – *qua* wine. Newman never allowed me to take my eye from the object . . . Newman remained outside the creative process, and Langford was absorbed into it.
>
> (Cardus 1947, 213–14)

Cardus' criticisms were often imbued with the parlance of religion, especially with a Roman Catholic hue, though he was not a practising Christian of any sort. He once described himself as 'an atheist who prays' and also wrote of this distinction about Christ: 'He [Jesus Christ] offered the world a complete code for civilized living, but the majority of people reject Him. The fact that He went to the Cross as an ordinary man – divesting himself of all power – moves me much more deeply than the description and theology of the Resurrection' (Cardus 1947, 64; Daniels 1969, 266). Under the influence of his employer at Shrewsbury, Cyril Alington, Cardus (1947, 81) wrote that it was Alington who 'compelled me to overhaul my disbelief, much to my annoyance; a young man's scepticism towards all revealed religion could be mightily dogmatic a quarter of a century ago'. It is therefore difficult to pin down Cardus' religious belief. Suffice it to say he appeared to believe in some kind of divine spirituality. This belief manifested itself in various ways, including the belief that a gramophone recording was a poor substitute for experiencing the musicality of a performer in the flesh. In reference to Kathleen Ferrier, he wrote that when listening to her on the gramophone the listener 'experienced only 50 per cent of her. The presence of Kathleen on the platform . . . you felt a *spiritual* communication' (Daniels 1969, 230). Cardus also spoke of the value of communication in relation to writers: 'The communication you receive from the hands of a great genius such as Dickens and Shakespeare is much more penetrating than a fleeting television show, which is only an image on the retina – and I don't think it goes very much farther than that!' (Daniels 1969, 268). Despite these difficult nuances of religious thought, Cardus ultimately believed that music was on a higher plane of life than other arts (Brooks 1985, 60).

Cardus' metaphysical appraisal of music is perhaps best demonstrated in his writings on the Austrian pianist, Arthur Schnabel (1882–1951). Revered for his astonishing technique and interpretive depth, Schnabel was one of the great pianists of all time. Cardus was especially captivated by Schnabel's performances of the Beethoven sonatas: 'you wouldn't be told that Schnabel was a man of distinction. His conversation within ten minutes would have made you think to yourself, "Who is he? What does he do? He's either a philosopher, a writer, a painter, or a musician"'

(Daniels 1969, 116).[4] Cardus described that 'in an almost clairvoyant way' he could recall Schnabel playing Beethoven's piano sonata op. 32 no. 111; that the pianist was like a 'spiritual medium' in that 'it is as though Beethoven was speaking through him' (Daniels 1969, 140). For Cardus, composers and conductors were not exactly people of faith, but nonetheless 'work through the medium of the senses' (Daniels 1969, 140). This, for Cardus, was what defined the 'romantic temperament' (Daniels 1969, 140). In taking the spiritual dimension a step further, Cardus recounted how Schnabel saw himself as a medium:

> Before going on to the platform for a public performance I would call to mind what Schnabel used to say to his students when they were nervous about playing in front of the audience: 'You will only be nervous, when you go the piano, if you are thinking about yourself. Think of Beethoven and then *he* will play'. Schnabel wanted the pianist to be a medium – so far as a human being can be. Whenever I heard Schnabel play I felt he *was* a medium through whom music was speaking. There are very few pianists today whom I would put in that category. (Daniels 1969, 260)

Believing music to be on a higher plane than the other arts and believing in the ability of a musician to channel music is a quintessential romantic value. Indeed, Cardus was very aware of this and once described himself as the last of the romantics (Daniels 1969, 262). It was even suggested to him by Daniels (1969, 95) that he was 'the arch-romantic among English music critics'. And it was a belief that was far from Newman's atheism.

Cardus' interest in atheism might be termed an ambiguous atheism because of its lack of wholesale rejection of God or the spiritual. This tentative form of atheism might also apply to the belief system of folk singers and songwriters, including labour activist Joe Hill (1879–1915), Bob Dylan (b. 1941), and Pete Seeger (1919–2014). Joe Hill's sardonic song 'The preacher and the slave' (1911) mocks organized religion, including the Salvation Army, for its lack of pragmatism and compassion. This cynical tone is also expressed in Bob Dylan's song 'Black cross', released in 1989. Pete Seeger was raised in a Christian household and found his way to communism and environmentalism and a plethora of social causes, writing and performing songs in their aid (Winkler 2011). In addition to writing new songs – many of which sold in the millions, such as 'Turn! Turn! Turn!' (1959), which was based largely on a biblical text – Seeger also revived well-known folk songs from a variety of

4 Other pianists Cardus greatly admired were Arthur Rubinstein, Muriel Cohen, and Ignaz Friedman.

sources, including a nineteenth-century German song, 'Die Gedanken sind frei' (Thoughts are free). Lyrics from the song include 'My thoughts freely flower . . . My thoughts give me power / No scholar can make them /No hunter can trap them . . . My thoughts will not cater / To duke or dictator.' The song ends with the lines 'Foundations may crumble / And structures may tumble / But free men shall cry / Die Gedanken sind frei.'

'Die Gedanken sind frei' is an anthem to freethinking. The lyrics are clear that the individual is an independent being and not controlled by any force. The foundations and structures that are deemed to possibly crumble and tumble are of course open to interpretation, but could refer to a number of scenes, from political control to the demise of Christianity (or religious thought in general) to secularization. However, it would, of course, be wrong to assume that anyone who sang this song was undertaking an act of self-disclosure. Any song can be sung without it being an act of autobiography.

Seeger falls into the category of an ambiguous atheist because it appears he was antitheist for part of his life but eventually came to believe in a God of sorts. In an interview about faith and God, he disclosed the following:

> Nobody knows for sure. But people undoubtedly get feelings which are not explainable and they feel they're talking to God or they're talking to their parents who are long dead. I feel most spiritual when I'm out in the woods. I feel part of nature. Or looking up at the stars. [I used to say] I was an atheist. Now I say, it's all according to your definition of God. According to my definition of God, I'm not an atheist. Because I think God is everything. Whenever I open my eyes I'm looking at God. Whenever I'm listening to something I'm listening to God. I've had preachers of the gospel, Presbyterians and Methodists, saying, 'Pete, I feel that you are a very spiritual person.' And maybe I am. I feel strongly that I'm trying to raise people's spirits to get together . . . I tell people I don't think God is an old white man with a long white beard and no navel; nor do I think God is an old black woman with white hair and no navel. But I think God is literally everything, because I don't believe that something can come out of nothing. And so there's always been something. Always is a long time. (Ford n.d.)

The idea of an omnipresent God or gods is the cornerstone of many traditions within institutionalized religions, but also in traditions in many indigenous communities tens of thousands of years old. In this excerpt, Seeger identifies himself as a believer of sorts. However, it is unclear when and why

he was an atheist (of an unambiguous kind) and what episode or strings of episodes led him to think otherwise.

A contemporary global artist whose career intersects with political and social causes – and faith – is Björk Guõmundsdóttir.[5] Surrounded by political activists in her childhood and absorbing a huge array of musical influences ranging from Stockhausen to jazz, she has an eclectic oeuvre. She has adopted and written music for a range of causes, including independence for Kosovo. Little is known about her religious beliefs, although her Facebook page (9 December 2012) states 'I was sure that I was an atheist, but as I matured, I realised nature is my religion.' Elsewhere she is reported to have claimed that if she had to choose a religion it would be Buddhism because 'it seems more liveable, closer to men'. Later in the quotation she went a step further, saying that 'Buddhists say we come back as animals and they refer to them as lesser beings. Well, animals aren't lesser beings, they're just like us. So I say fuck the Buddhists' (Björk, 'Buddhists', n.d.).

Regardless of her belief system, atheists around the world have appropriated Björk's songs for their purposes. Atheist Ireland, for example, used Björk's quote on atheism in an attempt to repeal the Irish blasphemy laws. Her quotes on atheism, along with quotes from twenty-five others, ranging from Pope Benedict XVI to Tim Minchin, were exhibited to make Atheist Ireland's argument that, should the law be taken to its extreme, then these twenty-five people will have broken the law. According to an article in the *Irish Times*, the new law 'defines blasphemy as publishing or uttering matter that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby intentionally causing outrage among a substantial number of adherents of that religion, with some defences permitted' (Edwardes 2010).

Some of Björk's songs are said to have atheistic themes. Her song, 'It's in our hands' is an example, nominated by Religious News Service in 2019 as one of the top five atheist anthems. Like Seeger's 'Die Gedanken sind frei', its central claim is for an individual to have the freedom of thinking for himself or herself. The lyrics repeat many times the words 'Look no further . . . It's in our hands . . . ', the phrase 'it's all there', suggesting – or implying – an existential state, free of religious or deistic being. On her website, however, Björk makes a much more strident statement against religion:

> We've been terrorised for more than four thousand years with these organised religions! Earth has existed for more than four billion years; I think she's able to defend herself against these tiny four thousand

5 For a biography of Björk, see Dibden (2009).

> years ... This idea – that you can only live with orders from the left hemisphere of the brain, by totally neglecting the animal part, the pagan, the physical and the natural one – is absurd. How could we have neglected nature and gotten caught up by the Bible or the Koran? How could we have obediently accepted this outrageous twelve-month calendar with months we don't know if they have 28, 29, 30 or 31 days? The body, it knows there are thirteen months: women bleed thirteen times during the year, there are thirteen full moons. But Christianity doesn't tolerate the 13th ... By removing this number, it [Christianity] thought itself stronger than nature. Skyscrapers in New York don't have the thirteenth floor: that says so much about the influence of religion on that country. Even in Iceland, men ended up thinking themselves stronger than nature and are starting to build large dams, in this country which used to be considered as the purest in Europe.
>
> (Björk, 'A statement against religion', n.d.)

Like Seeger, perhaps, Björk was existential rather than theological in her view of the religious work. In an interview with Anil Prasad in 2004, when asked, 'What does spirituality mean to you?', Björk replied:

> Overall, I disagree a lot with any organized religion. I think religion can suffocate one's own voice. I would like to think that each person has his or her own spirituality. I think we all have our own little corner where I think it's important to discover your own methods for exploring that, whether it's waking up in the middle of the night and staring out the window, mountain climbing, being silent, getting drunk, or having crazy sex. [laughs] I think spirituality should be something people define for themselves through whatever suits them.

The capacity for a song to become a creed or anthem for atheism is illustrated by 'It ain't necessarily so', an aria from Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*, which premièred in 1935. The song's lyrics question biblical truths such as the David versus Goliath battle and the story of Jonah and the whale. The song was subsequently taken up by a host of other artists over the following decades, including Australian rock star Normie Rowe. Rowe, in his childhood, was a member of a church choir, but his religious interests in adulthood are not known. His version of 'It ain't necessarily so' topped the charts in Melbourne and was within the top ten in many other Australian capitals, although the song was banned by radio 2SM (owned by the Roman Catholic Church) for obvious reasons (Rowe and Nimmervoll 2013, 47–8). With different lyrics, but using the same title, Mary Lou S. Williams adapted the song – a love story – set to the same tune. Over the years there have been

many other cuts and versions of the song around the world. The song at one time included an extra verse that was purportedly reserved for encores: 'Way back in 5000 B.C. / Old Adam an' Eve had to flee / Sure, dey did dat deed in / De Garden of Eden / But why chasterize you an' me?'

In the context of the opera's aria, whose atheism is it? Is it a projection of the composer's or librettist's belief system, or is it a personal statement of the character who sings it, Sportin' Life? And, in fact, to what extent is it an expression of atheism at all? Since its first performance in September 1935 the issue of this aria and its religious expression has received little attention, except when taken out of context and the words and music scrutinized in isolation. Perhaps the most sensitive interpretation of this song was undertaken by Richard Crawford in 1972. Crawford examined the song in the context of four ways in which the opera could be positioned: (1) as an American opera; (2) as American folklore; (3) as racial stereotype; and (4) as cultural exploitation. It is in the category of an expression of folklore that Crawford positions the opera and this particular song. In quoting the prominent New York music critic Virgil Thomson (1941, quoted in Thomson 1945), who described the opera as 'phony white folklore' and 'fake folklore', Crawford (1972, 26) argues, by way of other writers, including Johnson (1936, 26, quoted in Crawford 1972), that the lyrics are not authentic: 'It is not easy . . . to believe that Sportin' Life (a genuine product of Catfish Row, for all his smart talk about New York), could be so entirely liberated from the superstitious awe of Divinity which even the most depraved southern negro never quite loses.' For this reason, the opera – and this aria in particular – are labelled by Crawford to be 'fakelore', especially since he claims there was 'nothing like it' in the novel on which the opera was based, nor in the play *Porgy*. Thus, claims that the song is an atheist creed, when seen in the light of deeper analysis, become problematic.

'It ain't necessarily so' had a significant afterlife: it was a phrase that stuck with Larry Adler, a friend of Ira Gershwin's, and it became the title of Adler's autobiography, published in 1984. Adler was born into an observant Jewish family, but his association with Judaism was cultural rather than religious. In an extremely candid autobiography that is often self-deprecating, Adler (1984) discloses personal information about his life, including others' views of his poor treatment of women, his many brushes with the law, and his self-described failings as a father and lover. He even describes, towards the end of the book, his battle with depression and occasional thoughts of suicide. Yet there is no disclosure about the reasons leading to his deserting his Jewish faith. Early in the book it can be inferred that the reasons may have been to

do with the conflict of his early musical commitments to play gigs on Fridays and Saturdays.

The conflicting schedule of faith and music commitments was not lost on Adler. He writes early in the book that keeping kosher was important to him as a child, noting that 'Jewish habits, if not the real religion' hung on for a long time (Adler 1984, 3). He wrote also of his guilt in his teens for failing to observe the Sabbath and holy days, with no time for synagogue. He writes charmingly of meeting Al Capone and Capone's shock that Adler was missing Schul and failing to send his mother flowers on a Sunday (Adler 1984, 33–4).

Adler's progress towards shedding his Jewish faith cannot be measured in a singular event, but appears to have unfolded over time, though his faith's influence would not leave him completely. Adler was a wide reader and so his encounters with the works of Ockham, Spinoza, and Voltaire had been guiding forces on his path to unbelief. These writers are mentioned only in passing in the autobiography, but they represent an engagement with rational philosophy and other searches for meaning. Adler devotes a large part of one chapter of the book to describing his view of the ridiculousness and improbability of truths derived from astrology and other systems of belief or divine inspiration. He writes (1984, 63) that 'Faith's first cousin is gullibility' and baulks at claims made by Sun Yung Moon, calling the followers of such schemes 'suckers'. He questions the supernatural powers of the Bermuda Triangle and cosmology (1984, 61). He further ridicules claims of sightings of UFOs, followers of Houdini, and claims by mystics in the Philippines that surgery can be performed without anaesthetic if the patient is in the required frame of mind (1984, 61–3). Adler also has no time for transcendental meditation.

Clearly Adler had no respect for what he probably termed pseudoscience. By contrast, he clearly had an interest in the rationalist philosophers and, as becomes evident about a third of the way through the book, an interest in psychiatry. Ira Gershwin underwent psychiatric treatment, so this might have been how Adler became interested in this kind of medical treatment, but we do not know for sure.[6] In chapter 7, however, Adler provides more details about his interest in psychiatry and how it led him to treatment. In the early 1940s, Adler writes: 'Life was not going well. I was becoming self-destructive; I'd lost dates; I'd hurt myself, sometimes deliberately; I was a procrastinator. I began to worry about this, so I spoke to my friend

6 Gershwin's treatment is discussed briefly in Steinberg (1998, 357–8). I am grateful to Oliver Grey for suggesting this reference.

Dr Samuel Fogelson when I was in Chicago and asked him if he thought I should be analysed' (Adler 1984, 109).

And so Adler embarked on a series of consultations by first of all taking the Rorschach test. He was referred to Ernest Simmel, a student and friend of Freud, who had also treated Gershwin and 'who was known to be good with creative people' (Adler 1984, 109). Simmel's other clients included Judy Garland and Artie Shaw (Adler 1984, 110). Adler does not detail the extent of his treatment, but he did write that 'I can't say that psychoanalysis cured me of anything' but it did 'help me know myself' (1984, 110). While psychoanalysis might not have changed his life, his experience of his wife and daughter claiming shortly thereafter that he didn't show much love for them 'changed my life' (1984, 110). Towards the end of his life, Adler had a second encounter with psychoanalysis, purchasing a copy of Karen Horney's (1968) book *Self-Analysis*. In Adler's words, 'I did what Professor Horney advocated, writing down my thoughts and dreams, using the Freudian method of free association, no matter how ridiculous the finished product might be. It had seemed, at the time, that I was to get at the truth of some puzzling things' (1984, 110).

Adler was also interested in Communism, though his association with various members of the Communist Party and his unwitting support of them, most notably through his association with the delegation to Washington in the Committee for the First Amendment in 1948, was eventually to see Adler blacklisted in theatres all around the United States and to force him to relocate to the United Kingdom. It was also the cause of a bout of serious depression for Adler (1984, 180). Chapter 9 of Adler's autobiography details his nebulous associations with the Communists, which showed his lack of judgement and, at times, showed the irresponsible reporting of the press. Be that as it may, writing retrospectively about Communism in his autobiography, Adler asserted:

> I was never attached to the Communist Party. Often I agreed with them, often I worked with them, often I found that the Communists were the only ones saying anything worth saying. As a group, they were by far the most intelligent people in Hollywood. They were sometimes the most highly principled.
>
> I never felt like joining them. The Communists, often intellectual individually, were willing to put their intellect in blinkers if the Party told them so. They followed the party line. And that is where they lost me. I cannot follow *any* party line. I cannot be an Orthodox Jew or a devout

> Catholic for the same reason. Dogma, to me, is something that it shouldn't happen to. (Adler 1984, 150)

Later in the book he wrote of his disdain for Hasidism, stating (1984, 187) that he was 'always repelled by dogmatism'.

Despite Adler's religious convictions, he was nevertheless devoted to Jewish culture and politics. Until his associations with Communism became too murky, he was a regular speaker for the National Committee of Christians and Jews and the Jewish National Fund, which took him abroad to places such as South Africa, Rhodesia, and, of course, Israel. Adler wrote that he was 'Proud when Palestine became Israel' but soon after wrote on subsequent visits that he 'disliked the growing chauvinism in Israel' (Adler 1984, 188–9). Still, he articulated (1984, 189) that 'I feel, illogically, that Jews *do* have a special code of morality' (though he failed to elaborate on the point). He wrote of the huge satisfaction he derived from playing for 2000 Israeli soldiers during the Six Day War in June 1967 and the many re-calls he had for performing *Sharm-el-Sheikh*. Proud to be Jewish, Adler (1984, 108) also recalled something Sascha Pranes, an Israeli violinist, told him: 'there was a practical reason why the leading violinists were Jews. They came from ghettoes and their parents wanted them to find a better life. A violin was portable, you could earn your living with it anywhere. Sounds reasonable.'

Despite professing no belief, Adler occasionally pokes fun at himself for reverting to form. During a turbulent flight some time in the 1940s, the plane encountered a sandstorm; Adler (1984, 134) wrote

> I fastened my seat belt, feeling that this might be my last act, and found myself praying. Almost immediately, I stopped. I was not religious, had given it up long since. I was ashamed of myself for, in fact, trying to take out a last minute insurance policy. 'Take it back, you sonofabitch', I said to myself. 'If you're going to die, do it honestly'. I got a prayer refund.

Despite feeling for a moment the need to pray on the cusp of a near-death experience, Adler felt no need to pray on his visit to the Wailing Wall. Describing this encounter, Adler (1984, 201–2) observed that 'I am not religious, haven't been since I was a kid, but I went to stand at the wall. I didn't pray, I have nothing to pray for, but I stood there in silence, for several minutes.'

The last paragraph of Adler's autobiography sums up his worldview.

> And a last great thought? What advice would I give to young people? I would say think for yourself, accept no dogma, resist the pressure to conform. Better be a lonely individualist than a contented conformist. To anyone in authority who tells you what's good for you, ask: 'How do you know?' Test the validity of the most dogmatic of beliefs. To many, faith is enough. Not for me. I respect the

> truth, if the truth is there to find. What I have said is what I have told my children. But just because Daddy says it, Daddy isn't always right. Daddy had no monopoly on wisdom. So I can end as I began – it ain't necessarily so.
>
> (Adler 1984, 247)

Conclusion

In *The Truth Seeker Collection of Forms, Hymns, and Recitations* (1877) the book's editor, D. M. Bennett, declared that:

> No sensible person should accept any creed or system of belief for which he has no proof; but having found it to his satisfaction, he should be allowed the free exercise of his freedom of opinion. We assuredly can all agree upon the common ground of Human Progression and in opposition to priestcraft, bigotry and the myths and fables of the past ages of ignorance and superstition. Here we can fraternize and work in common. (Bennett 1877, vi)

The faiths of the people surveyed in this chapter – Newman, Walker, Cardus, Seeger, Björk, and Adler – demonstrate their clear rejection of ecclesiastical norms or religious dogma, but to varying degrees. For some people, such as Newman and Björk, their rejection of religion was complete and unambiguous, yet for others, such as Cardus and Walker, despite their freethinking, they nevertheless held onto remnants of belief. Even Adler's atheism might be hard to discern, for while clearly he rejected the religious dogma of Judaism, he was a great champion of Jewish cultural causes. Martin Marty (1964) and Susan Budd (1977) – among others – long ago showed us that there is a huge variety of unbelief: the personalities and their causes illustrated in this chapter unequivocally support Marty's and Budd's argument.

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40

Visual Arts

RICHARD RICHARDS

> Sooner or later, if you love art, you will come across a strange fact: there is almost no modern religious art in museums or in books of art history. It is a state of affairs that is at once obvious and odd, known to everyone and yet hardly whispered about.
>
> *Elkins 2004, ix*

Introduction

To the casual observer who knows some art history, goes to established art museums, and reads fine arts publications, it surely seems that the visual arts have become much less religious over time. From the ancient Sumerians to the Renaissance, art was filled with religious content and displayed in religious contexts. But from the Enlightenment to twentieth-century modernism, artwork with religious content seems to have become increasingly rare, and only atypically exhibited in religious settings or serving religious functions. Contemporary postmodern art, if it has any religious content or function at all, is almost certain to be transgressive rather than a sincere expression of religious belief.

How should we understand this trend? We might be tempted to see it as just a particular manifestation of the more general secularization of western culture. It may be that, but there is much more to understanding this trend in art. As we shall see, we can understand it in terms of changing "artworlds," an idea introduced by Arthur Danto and adopted by George Dickie, but developed here in terms of what we might instead call "art niches." The art niches in which established art museums have operated, and in which art history textbooks have been written, have become increasingly atheistic. This involves not just the content of the visual arts and the beliefs of the artists, but also the institutions, concepts, theories, conventions, and practices that operate in the creation and experience of the visual arts.

To better understand how art niches have become increasingly atheistic, we will first look briefly at the trend in the visual arts away from religious content and function, then address how we might best conceive *atheism*. Following that will be an introduction to the *artworld* idea as introduced by Danto and Dickie, and a more developed way of this thinking in terms of *art niches*. We will then take a look at some of the features of atheistic art niches, and how these niches might function and help us understand this apparent trend in the visual arts. One insight revealed by this approach is the possibility of the simultaneous functioning of both theistic and atheistic art niches. Religious art may have largely disappeared from the dominant art niche with its art museums and general art history textbooks, but it has clearly not disappeared from all art niches.

The Historical Trend

Even a brief scan of a standard comprehensive art history textbook reveals a strong trend away from religious content and functioning in the visual arts. The massive 1200-page Stokstad and Cothren *Art History, Sixth Edition* (2018), widely adopted in university art history courses, tells the following story. While it isn't clear what religious content or function prehistoric art may have had, by 3400 BC the Sumerians were building temples and decorating them with statues of the gods. A millennium later, the Egyptians were building their temples, tombs, and pyramids with statues of the gods, some of human and some of animal form. In the second millennium BC, the Babylonians were building temples containing sculptures of gods. The Greeks of the first millennium, while their art was not all religious in content and function, also built many temples filled with sculptures of their gods. This religious functioning of art seems to have continued with the Etruscans and, to a somewhat lesser degree, the Romans.

In the first millennium BC, we see the biblical paintings of Jewish art, followed in the next millennium by the earliest Christian art, which borrowed its style and imagery from Jewish and Roman art, and presented stories of Christ's life in paintings and frescos in churches and shrines. The European art of the Byzantine era, beginning in the fifth century AD, included religious-themed wall paintings and frescos, painted icons, illuminated manuscripts, and ivory triptychs that served as portable devotional objects. Two of the most striking examples of Byzantine art are the Cathedral of Saint Mark in Venice, and the Chora Church of Istanbul, which seems to have every surface, including the ceilings, covered with

religious-themed paintings. Islamic art, with its elaborate mosaics and designs, can be found in mosques throughout the Muslim world around the end of the first millennium BC. In the Romanesque art at the beginning of the second millennium, religious sculptures decorate the cathedrals, while religious images appear in textiles and manuscripts. Gothic art was just as religious, with its sculpture, illuminated manuscripts, and stained-glass windows in churches and cathedrals. In fourteenth-century Europe we see religious art in the chapel frescos, sculptures, altarpieces, and embroidery. In fifteenth-century Flanders there were paintings of biblical events, the Annunciation, the deposition of Christ's body, the virgin and child, as well as many elaborately painted altarpieces. The Italian Renaissance produced some of the most revered art of any time, much of it religious, including Michelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and his sculpture of "The Pieta" at the Vatican in Rome, Leonardo's "Last Supper" mural in Milan, religious paintings by Raphael and Fra Angelico, and more.

In seventeenth-century art we still see painting with religious themes, as in Peter Paul Ruben's "Raising of the Cross," Rembrandt's "Three Crosses," and Poussin's scenes with St. Matthew and St. John, but it seems that the artwork of this time was increasingly turning to other subjects – to landscapes, still-lifes, portraits of royalty and wealthy landowners, and scenes from peasant life. In the Rococo art of the eighteenth century, luxury and sensuality seem to have replaced religious themes, as seen in the works of Boucher and Fragonard. With the exception of some romantic painters, such as Caspar David Friedrich and the Pre-Raphaelites, who wanted to bring spirituality back into painting, European nineteenth-century paintings seemed almost entirely non-religious, as seen in the work of realists such as Corot, to the impressionists and post-impressionists who mostly painted landscapes, portraits, still-lifes, and action paintings. With modernist art, represented most notably by the works of Matisse and Picasso, the subject matter was almost never religious. In postmodern art the religious content sometimes returned, but as transgressive rather than sincere. The photograph "Piss Christ" by Andres Serano, of a crucifix in a beaker filled with the artist's urine, and Chris Ofili's painting "The Holy Virgin Mary," with its elephant dung and pornographic cutouts, are two of the most famous (or infamous) artworks with transgressive religious content.

Explaining this Trend

According to this brief, conventional textbook survey of the history of art, there seems to be a dramatic decrease in the religious content of art. The

representation of religious figures and events seems to have largely disappeared – unless those representations are transgressive. There also seems to be a decrease in the religious functioning of art, in that art ceased to be created for temples, churches, and cathedrals or to serve religious functions as an object of worship, as part of a ritual, as a didactic aide, or as an ideological tool to advance some particular religious dogma. And while the religious artwork of the past may represent religious figures and events, and still be exhibited in a religious setting (the Sistine Chapel, for instance), the viewers there may typically treat it not as an object with religious content and function, but as an object that supplies an aesthetic experience, as it might in an art museum, where the formal qualities of the artwork, the skill of the artist, and the place of the work and artist within the art tradition are what are important. If so, the religious content has become little more than historical background to the aesthetic functioning.

Art historian James Elkins, quoted at the beginning of this chapter (calling it a "strange fact" that "there is almost no modern religious art in museums or in books of art history") presents one possible interpretation of this trend, relative to the commitments of modernism:

> Modernism was predicated on a series of rejections and refusals, among them the 19th century sense that art – that is academic art, and mainly painting – is an appropriate vehicle for religious stories. From this point of view a contemporary painting of the Assumption of the Virgin would be in a sense misguided, because it would carry on a moribund tradition of narrative painting last practiced at the end of the 19th century. It would involve a misunderstanding of what painting has become. (Elkins 2004, ix)

On this view, modernism decisively rejected the *kind* of artwork that has religious content and function, so any art after modernism that tried to do this is simply outside of the art (painting) tradition.

This is plausible, but it cannot be the entire story. The trend away from religious content and function in art seems to have begun long before modernism. According to J. Sage Elwell, it began in the Italian Renaissance, where economic changes and the rise of middle-class patrons, the progress of science and the focus on the natural world, and the turn to classical humanism, which prioritizes the individual over the church, ultimately led to the secularization of art. So while art of this period may have had religious content, as in the works of Leonardo and Michelangelo, there was an increasing secular demand for art and a turn away from a transcendent spiritual world to the natural world around us, all accompanied by

a reduction in the social and political influence of the established churches (Elwell 2013).

Perhaps the Renaissance and modernism were both factors in the disappearance of religious art, but there is surely much more that is potentially relevant. The Enlightenment emphasis on reason over faith, and the postmodern turn to irony over sincere belief are both surely part of a comprehensive historical explanation. We will later look at the art niche framework for a more systematic understanding, but we should first note some complications. First, in the brief history here there is a narrow focus on the art of a particular tradition beginning in the area around the Mediterranean and Middle East, and spreading through Europe and North America. Obviously there are other visual art traditions worldwide, and these traditions may have different trends that would potentially be of interest in understanding the relation between visual art and atheism. And while we cannot look at these other traditions here, perhaps the art niche framework can provide a better understanding there as well.

A second complication is that the disappearance of religious artwork from the tradition discussed here does not coincide precisely with the disappearance of religious belief among artists. The list of artists known to be sincerely religious in the last several centuries might just begin, but certainly not end, with Jean-August-Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix, William Blake, Caspar David Friedrich, Thomas Cole, Jean-Léon Gérôme, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Éduard Manet, Paul Cezanne, Vincent Van Gogh, Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, Georges Rouault, Emile Nolde, Piet Mondrian, Salvador Dali, and Kazimir Malevich (Elkins 2004; Howes 2007). Even though all these artists were religious, many of them produced little or no religious art. And for those that did produce religious work, it was typically, at most, a small proportion of their output. Paul Cezanne is a striking example. He was a faithful churchgoer, but seems to have never produced a religious painting (Howes 2007, 23).

Moreover, those artworks that did have religious content did not always seem to have a religious function. Éduard Manet's painting "Christ among the Angels," one of his three paintings with religious content, represents the appearance of angels around the dead body of Christ, but was painted for an art salon in 1864 and was never exhibited in a religious context. It seems that it was painted and exhibited for aesthetic reasons rather than religious, as Elkins explains, quoting Thierry De Duve's *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art*:

> It is certainly true that in the context of the Salon where it was first shown, Manet's painting was not religious. It was a work of art, "offered to the hordes jockeying their way into the Salon to see some art, pass the time, be seen and flaunt their attire, and in the best scenario, brush up on culture a little, maybe even to seek out the soul which the materialism of modern life has deprived them of – but definitely not to perform their devotions." (Elkins 2004, 25)

And there are reasons to think that it was unlikely to have been painted to serve traditional didactic religious functions, since it clearly misrepresents the events as presented in the relevant religious texts (De Duve 2001, 11–12; Elkins 2004, 23–5).

A third complication is that while the artists *in the art history textbooks and museums* seem to have ceased making religious art – whether or not they were believers – there is nonetheless a lot of religious art out there. Warner Sallman's 1940, theatrically lit "Head of Christ" is one of the most reproduced paintings of the twentieth century. It has reportedly been reproduced over 500 million times, "on church bulletins, calendars, posters, bookmarks, prayer cards, tracts, buttons, stickers and stationery," and even on clocks – the "Inspira-Clock" – and lamps – the "Inspira-Lamp" (Grimes 1994). Copies of it were distributed to American servicemen in Europe and Asia during World War II (Morgan 2005, 247–8). After the war, it was embraced by many American religious groups, from Catholic to Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, and Mormon. Several decades later, Lyndon Johnson, the vice-president at the time, posed with it in a publicity shot "gazing reverentially" at the painting (Morgan 2005, 249–50). Another painting by Sallman that was also widely reproduced, "Christ our Pilot," depicts an oversized Jesus standing behind a sailor at the wheel of a ship, one hand on the sailor's shoulder, the other pointing the way. This painting was modeled after an earlier painting for a World War II poster by an unnamed artist, which had Jesus standing behind and directing a uniformed sailor (Morgan 2005, 165–6).

Other widely reproduced twentieth-century religious paintings include Harry Anderson's "God's Two Books," representing a woman in a garden, transfixed by a large image of God's face in the foliage of a tree (Morgan 2005, 91). Arnold Friberg, who worked on the Cecil B. DeMille film *The Ten Commandments*, produced many paintings for the Mormon Church, depicting events and people of the Book of Mormon. His most famous and widely reproduced painting, though, may be "The Prayer at Valley Forge," picturing George Washington on his knees in prayer next to his horse (Swanson 2001). In the 1950s and 1960s the Mormon Church adopted the "Christus" statue of

Jesus with outstretched hands, sculpted by the Danish artist Bertel Thorvaldsen in 1838. Copies of it are now displayed in temples and visitor centers worldwide (Jacobsen 1992). Two of the most successful American illustrators of the twentieth century painted many religious scenes. Norman Rockwell painted scenes of people engaged in prayer, and N. C. Wyeth, father of Andrew Wyeth, produced many paintings of scenes from the Bible. And if we go back to the nineteenth century, we can find lithographs and engravings in pamphlets that were used by Protestant religions in the United States to promote prayer, piety, temperance, family duties, and missionary work (Morgan 2005).

None of this recent religious art appears in the massive art history textbook by Stokstad and Cothren. There is no mention at all of Warner Sallman, Harry Anderson, N. C. Wyeth, Norman Rockwell, or Arnold Friberg. Perhaps it is just that modern religious art simply may not be very good – not good enough to be included in art history textbooks. As James Elkins tells us: "Most religious art – I'm saying this bluntly here because it needs to be said – is just bad art. Virtually all religious art made for homes and churches is poor and out of touch" (Elkins 2004, 20). While Elkins doesn't tell us precisely how and why modern religious art is bad, this claim is not on its face controversial nor helpful in understanding the exclusion of religious art. Of course, most modern religious art is not very good. Most non-religious art is not very good either. Anyone who has been to student exhibitions at a high school, college, or university, or to the average gallery on the street of any town or city, will have likely seen art that is mostly not very good. And this is hardly limited to the visual arts. Most violin playing, most opera singing, most ballet dancing, most of anything in the arts is not very good. But we might think that *some* modern religious art is good insofar as it is done with great skill, as seen in the artwork of N. C. Wyeth, Norman Rockwell, and Arnold Friberg. If it were just a matter of technical skill, surely these artists should be in art history textbooks, and exhibited in major art museums – including their religious works.

Perhaps it is not that modern religious art is not very good, but that it is "out of touch," as Elkins puts it. It may be that Wyeth, Rockwell, and Friberg are not in general art history textbooks because no modern illustrators – narrative painters – are in general art history textbooks. Narrative art, as Elkins puts it, goes "against the grain of the history of modernism." Certainly there was a period in this art tradition when abstraction was the rage and representational narratives were going "against the grain." But with post-modern art we don't see a universal rejection of narrative art, as illustrated in

the Stokstad and Cothren art history textbook. For instance, the neo-expressionist painting "Heath of the Brandenburg March" by Gerhard Richter seems to be a narrative about warfare and Germany's Nazi past (Stokstad and Cothren 2018, 1124). Jean-Michel Basquiat produced narrative paintings about the African American experience (Stokstad and Cothren 2018, 1125). Cindy Sherman's film stills tell stories about female identity. Jeff Wall and Kerry James create similar narratives about race, class, and poverty (Stokstad and Cothren 2018, 1143–4). Modern installation art is likewise filled with narratives. Patricia Cronin's "Shrine for Girls" is a narrative about violence against women (Stokstad and Cothren 2018, 1150). The rejection of narrative religious art is clearly not *just* a consequence of a general rejection of narrative art.

Atheism

At the beginning of this chapter I claimed that we can understand this trend in visual art away from religious content and functioning in terms of increasingly atheistic art niches. If so, we need a satisfactory understanding of *atheism*. One might begin by reference to the so-called "New Atheists" – Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett – who have been intensely critical of the belief in a God or gods, and religious belief in general, as both irrational and immoral (Walters 2010, 2). But this is surely too narrow, and does not capture the possible range of doxastic attitudes we might associate with atheism. One might, for instance, be cautiously skeptical about the possibility of the existence of a God or gods. This way of conceiving atheism in terms of belief suggests that a theist would be someone who believes that a God (or group of gods) exists, and an atheist would be someone who either actively believes that a God (or group of gods) doesn't exist (positive atheism) or more passively simply doesn't believe that a God or group of gods exists (negative atheism). This approach to atheism is the framework for the recent *Oxford Companion to Atheism*, in which atheism is taken to be "an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods" (Bullivant 2013).

While belief is surely relevant, there are several worries here. First is the fact that there are people who profess belief in a God or gods, but don't behave as if they believe – by attending religious services or practicing religious rituals. They may therefore be "de facto" atheists in spite of the fact they are believers in some sense. And then there are those who don't profess belief, or profess disbelief, but behave as if they believe. They may be

"de facto" theists (Walters 2010, 15–16). Mere expression of belief doesn't seem sufficient to fully understand all the phenomena that might be relevant. As Kerry Walters argues in his *Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, disbelief in God or gods is only one aspect of atheism (Walters 2010, 5).

A second worry is the inability to say precisely what *belief* is. Is it assent by the will to an idea formed by the understanding, as René Descartes claimed in his *Meditations*? Is it the vivacity of an idea, as David Hume argued in his *Treatise of Human Nature?* Is it to be understood in terms of consequences for behavior, as Charles Peirce argued in his essay "The fixation of belief." Or should we think of it in terms of *propositional attitude*, as many contemporary philosophers are inclined to think: "the mental state of having some attitude, stance, take, or opinion about a proposition or about the potential state of affairs in which that proposition is true" (Schwitzgebel 2015). Or, finally, should we adopt a kind of *eliminativism*, the view that beliefs are just postulates of an outdated folk psychology, useful pragmatically in predicting the behavior of other people, but without any real theoretical significance? (Schwitzgebel 2015).

One might instead start with the idea that belief is a propositional attitude, but set aside the attitude – the subjective psychological and behavioral elements – and focus just on the propositions that express the content of the belief. This is the strategy adopted by Paul Draper in his entry on "Atheism and agnosticism" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Draper 2017). The advantage of this approach is that we can talk about the truth or falsity of theism and atheism in terms of the propositions that assert the existence or the non-existence of God or gods, and the strength of the inferences for or against each proposition. This is certainly useful for philosophers to think about atheism, given their traditional focus on the arguments – premises, inferences, and conclusions – about the existence of God. But this narrow approach also seems of little value in thinking about the visual arts. Sculptures and paintings are hardly propositions and arguments, even though an artwork may occasionally present a proposition, as with Magritte's "The treachery of images," which represents a pipe along with the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe."

We can perhaps instead begin with the most general way of thinking about atheism, as the privative "a" meaning "not," modifying the term "theism." In this broad sense, "atheism" just means "not theism," and might involve belief, behavior, and propositions, relative to the different ways of conceiving God or gods referenced in the brief history of the visual art here, from the gods of ancient Sumeria, Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, to the gods of

Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the "God of the Philosophers" (the "omni-God" – omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient, etc.). (How far we would want to extend "theism" and "atheism" to refer to the figures in other religious traditions is an open question.) In this broad, general way of understanding "theism" and "atheism," these terms may plausibly also involve elements of the social context in which the visual arts were practiced – the art theories, practices, conventions, institutional rules, and commitments. We shall see how, through the ideas of the *artworld* and *art niche*.

Artworlds and Art Niches

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp submitted a urinal he titled "Fountain" for inclusion in a New York art exhibition. This seemed to raise questions about what makes an object a work of art. Could a commercially produced urinal be a work of art, and if so, what makes it art? In 1964, Arthur Danto, referencing Duchamp's "Fountain" as well as Andy Warhol's "Brillo Boxes" (a grouping of plywood boxes made to look just like boxes you might see in a warehouse), argued that because these objects were visually indistinguishable from an ordinary urinal and ordinary Brillo boxes, there must be something in the context that makes them works of art. It was, he argued, a particular theory:

> What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art and keeps it from collapsing into the real object that it is . . . Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory as well as a considerable amount of the history of recent New York painting. (Danto 1964, 581)

An object, Danto tells us here, *becomes* a work of art by bringing it into the artworld through a theory of art. Duchamp's urinal and Warhol's Brillo boxes were brought into the artworld by the "reality theory," according to Danto, that tells us works of art are not just the imitation of objects, but can be the real objects themselves.

Danto doesn't tell us here precisely what the artworld involves, and how it makes these real objects works of art, but George Dickie develops this general approach in his *institutional theory of art*. In the artworld, according to Dickie, artists create artifacts with the cooperation of those playing supplementary roles (as art critic, museum director, etc.) for a public prepared to view or experience that art, all done in conformity with established

cultural practices, rules, and conventions (Dickie 1984, 66–7). So a commercially produced urinal could *be made* a work of art in an artworld, with the cooperation of an exhibition director, who places it in front of a prepared public who knows art conventions and practices, and treats it as an art object. What is important here is that Danto and Dickie are asking us to look beyond the object itself to understand the nature of a work of art – to the practices and conventions that govern the production of art, the people who make and experience art, and the theories in play about art.

This *artworld* idea helps us begin to understand why a commercially produced urinal, and what looks like ordinary Brillo boxes, can be works of art – based on art theories, cultural roles, rules, practices, and conventions at play in a social context. But this way of thinking is not fully adequate. Both Danto and Dickie seem to write as if there were just a single global art*world* in which all works of art get made, implying a single set of supplementary roles, a single viewing public, and a single set of theories, rules, practices, and conventions. (While Dickie does distinguish the different "artworld systems" within the artworld, they are just associated with the different arts – painting, theater, etc. [Dickie 1984, 75].) One might think instead, though, that the theory and context that make a urinal and Brillo boxes *art* are just part of a *particular*, more limited artworld centered on New York City in the first half of the twentieth century. If so, there may be different and distinguishable contemporary art contexts that govern the creation of works of art in different ways.

This inadequacy of the *artworld* idea is apparent when we look at the recent trends in religion and art sketched out earlier. As we saw there, sincere religious art disappeared from major art museums and general art history textbooks, but did not disappear elsewhere, as Sallman's "Head of Christ," Rockwell's prayer paintings, Wyeth's illustrations of biblical stories, and Friberg's illustrations of Book of Mormon stories all demonstrate. Perhaps there were different roles, conventions, and theories that governed the production and experience of these religious artworks. Perhaps in some sense there were different *artworlds* at play. To understand the production of religious art that was separate from the production of the art that has been written about in art history textbooks and shown in art museums, we need a way of thinking more finely grained than that of a global *artworld*. Perhaps the idea of an *art niche* can help us better understand the complex changing role of religion in the visual arts.

Elsewhere I have argued for a way of understanding art niches within a systematic biological framework, as part of an "ecology" of art (Richards

2017, 2019). But we needn't adopt the full biological framework to see how the idea of an *art niche* might help us here. The fundamental idea is that we have engineered the environments in which we interact – in this case, making and experiencing art. Most obvious are the engineered buildings and spaces. We learn to draw and paint in studios in schools, colleges, and academies. We exhibit art in galleries, museums, schools, churches, restaurants, and private homes. There are also the artifacts and tools. We paint using brushes, paint, and canvas. We make video art with video cameras and projectors. And for installation art we use a wide variety of tools, objects, and materials. The kind of art we make and experience is at least partly dependent on what our engineered environment is like in these concrete ways. We cannot make paintings without paint, and we cannot make video art without video cameras.

But there are also what we might think of as *cognitive technologies* – the concepts and theories we employ. The very idea of *art* is a cognitive technology in this sense, and it guides and constrains what we do when we make and experience art. We also have narrower concepts of painting, sculpture, video, and installation art that guide us in what we do. These cognitive technologies influence the methods of teaching and learning art, and the practices, conventions, and rules for doing and exhibiting art. Within a niche, for instance, and based on some way of conceiving art, we have practices of painting some subjects and not others, and practices of painting them in particular ways – practices that become conventions or explicit rules, all bound up with explicit theories about what counts as art, what counts as good art, and why some artwork is good and some is bad.

Finally, there are the institutional technologies that can reward practices and enforce conventions and rules in what they recognize as legitimate ways of doing things. Art academies, colleges, and universities confer degrees and status on those trained in particular ways of doing things. Museums legitimize artworks – and *kinds* of artworks – by purchasing and exhibiting them. Galleries function within the commerce of art, setting prices and selling some kinds of art, but not others. Churches commission artwork. Publishers produce art history textbooks marketed to faculty and students at colleges and universities that tell us what artworks are important in the grand historical narrative of art. And they tell us indirectly what works are less important or unimportant by excluding them. Newspapers and magazines have art critics who tell readers (they "prepare the public") how to experience, interpret, and evaluate artworks.

These institutional technologies seem to establish and reinforce a social structure to art niches, in that not all who work in the visual arts interact equally. Since university art departments typically hire only those with advanced university degrees, for instance, commercial artists without these degrees tend to be excluded from any academic art niche that is centered on universities. Perhaps there are also niche structures associated with geographic regions. In the United States, those who work in the New York art scene typically interact with each other more than they do with those working in the San Francisco Bay Area, in the southwestern United States, centered on Santa Fe, or in the western mountain resort towns of Jackson Hole, Park City, Telluride, and Aspen. And the visual art in these disparate geographic areas varies dramatically. One need only look at the art presented and discussed in the magazine *Southwest Art* – published in Colorado – and compare it with the art presented and discussed in the magazine *ARTnews* – published in New York City. *Southwest Art* presents artwork in more traditional painting styles typical of the eighteenth through mid-twentieth centuries. *ARTnews* presents installation, video, and performance art, with very little art in traditional painting styles. And what is represented in these two publications is also very different. In *Southwest Art* we see pastoral landscapes, wildlife, romanticized portraits, and figure studies, all representing a more traditional view on life. In *ARTnews* we instead see progressive political viewpoints expressed, typically about ethnicity, race, and gender. Perhaps to understand the different kinds of artwork in these two publications, we need to know something about the contexts – the art niches – associated with each.

An Atheistic Art Niche

The idea of an art niche helps us better understand the broad trend in the visual arts away from sincere religious content and functioning, by providing an explicit and systematic framework that tells us to look at governing concepts, theories, practices, conventions, rules, and institutions. How is visual art conceived? What are the accepted theories about art, its functions, and what makes it good? What are the accepted practices, conventions, and rules? What are the relevant institutions and how do they reinforce these practices, conventions, and rules, in part through how they confer status within the niche? This way of thinking helps us understand James Elkins' experience with a 1990 exhibition, "Revelations: Artists Look at Religions," in which he served as one of four jurors. As he recounts the experience, for two

full days he and three other jurors – all artists – looked at hundreds of slides, resumes, and artist's statements. There were a dozen works by major artists, including Andres Serrano's "Madonna and Child II," a photograph of a Madonna with child figurine submersed in urine, and Joel Peter Witkin's "God's Earth and Heaven," a photograph of nude transsexuals in a setting, with poses modeled after Botticelli's "Birth of Venus." Many of the works, Elkins tells us, were enigmatic and only vaguely spiritual, but some submitted works were clearly by true believers. One painting, for instance, was of a dove flying in the interior of a crystal palace reminiscent of the palace in the film *Wizard of Oz*. The jurors liked it, thinking it to be quirky, but rejected it when it was discovered from the artist's statement that it was painted by a nun, and it was her image of heaven. Another artist submitted slides of paintings of leaves, "big and succulent" like Georgia O'Keeffe's, but when it was revealed the artist was a monk, that work was rejected for being "too sincere." At the end of the process:

> The only religious work we accepted into the show was an abstract circular pattern done by a Native American. It was a religious symbol of some sort, perhaps related to a Navajo *ikaah* (sand painting) but the artist didn't say. We accepted it, I think, because we didn't know what the religion was. To us it was an abstract painting. (Elkins 2004, 47)

Elkins concludes that:

> The art world can accept a wide range of "religious" art by people who hate religion, by people who are deeply uncertain about it, by the disgruntled and the disaffected and the skeptical, but there is no place for artists who express straightforward religious faith. To fit into the art world, work with a religious theme has to fulfill several criteria. It has to demonstrate the artist has second thoughts about religion, and the religious ideas have to be woven into the work, because otherwise, it looks as if art is playing propaganda for religion. It also has to appear that the artist is meditative and uncertain about both art and religion: ambiguity and self-critique have to be integral to the work. And it follows that irony must pervade the art, must be the air that it breathes. (Elkins 2004, 47)

There are several things to notice in Elkins' analysis here. First, some religious content was permissible – the exhibition asks for it specifically. But second, an artwork cannot be a straightforward expression of religious faith, at least of some religions – in this case the religion of the nun and the monk. It must reflect some reservation, uncertainty, or opposition, and therefore cannot serve as propaganda. Third, ambiguity and self-critique

must be integral to the work. Fourth, irony must pervade the art. Finally, even though it was a religious exhibition in theme, it was not a religious institution that was organizing and presenting it for religious purposes. The important point here is that there was a set of conventions in play, each of which weighs against the inclusion of sincere religious art.

As we saw earlier, Elkins raised the possibility that the exclusion of religious art was due in part to a theory of art associated with the "modernism" movement that rejected narrative religious painting (Elkins 2004, ix). This may be right, but in 1990 modernism was a movement of the past. Over the last half of the twentieth century, postmodernism had become dominant in art departments at universities and in museum exhibitions. The term "postmodernism" is commonly taken to refer to many, seemingly disparate, commitments and ideas, many of them rejections of views associated with modernism, but many also built upon these views, such as the rejection of the tradition of religious narrative painting. One distinctive postmodern commitment is a hostility to dominant ideologies seen as maintaining the status quo (Butler 2002, 29). As Christopher Butler describes it: "The postmodernist attitude is . . . one of a suspicion that can border on paranoia" (Butler 2002, 3). If so, we can see why the jurors in the 1990 exhibition rejected the nun's painting, because "it might serve as propaganda" for that "dominant" religious ideology.

A closely related commitment of postmodernism is its challenge to the status hierarchies associated with dominant ideologies (Butler 2002, 56–9). The artists who were rejected were a nun and a monk, each with a particular status in a dominant religious hierarchy. They might be seen as producing propaganda *because* of their status. Perhaps it would have been permissible for someone with no status in the hierarchy to present a sincere work of religious art. This seems to be the case in a 2018 art exhibit at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, "Embodying Faith." In this exhibition, artworks from the European painting tradition were placed next to some "outsider" work on a similar theme. For example, Lucas Cranach's "The Resurrection, from the series 'The Passion'" was hung next to an artwork titled "A Group of Disciples Witnessed the Ascension of Jesus," tempera on a paper bag, by an "outsider" – Sybil Gibson, born in Dora, Alabama in 1908 and died in Florida in 1995. Other outsider art in this exhibition included a glittery "Vodou Flag or Banner" of the Madonna and Christ child represented with dark skin, and a cotton panel covered with paint and glitter, titled "Five Loaves and Two Fishes," also representing Jesus and other figures with dark skin. There was also a plywood book on display, "The Miracles of Jesus," representing a series

of miraculous events in which all of the figures in the book are represented with dark skin.

These works, apparently sincere reflections of faith, could be seen as permissible from a postmodern stance because they undermine established hierarchies in three ways. First, the artists themselves were not working within the tradition associated with one hierarchy – that of trained painters in the European tradition. They seem to instead be working within folk traditions of the south, painting on paper bags, cotton fabric, and plywood. Second, they appear to be from a marginalized group – poor southern African Americans. Third, the religious figures were represented as having dark skin, undercutting a dominant racial narrative of the past that presented them with light skin. This exhibition also seems to reflect another postmodern commitment, the rejection of the distinction and opposition between high and low art (Butler 2002, 64). The "low" folk art of southern African Americans is placed next to the "high" art of the European painters such as Lucas Cranach, and presented as equal. Perhaps this questioning of the dominant ideology and its hierarchy makes these sincere religious works permissible from a postmodern stance when they would not be otherwise.

These same conventions might be at play in the initial positive response of the jurors for the 1990 exhibition to the nun's painting of a crystal palace with a dove, describing it as "quirky." While Elkins doesn't tell us what the jurors had in mind, one possibility is that they initially thought that its quirkiness indicated the artist was not trained in the tradition – and was therefore an outsider in that sense. In this case, an acceptance of the painting would be a way of undermining one status hierarchy in art. Or the jurors might have believed that the artist was trained, but was caricaturing or mocking sincere religious belief by visual reference to the kitschy crystal palace in the film *Wizard of Oz*. But the second interpretation could not be maintained after the discovery that the artist was a nun. Acceptance of the artwork could not then undermine a dominant status hierarchy, nor as Elkins tells us in the passage quoted above, "demonstrate the artist has second thoughts about religion." Nor would irony "pervade the art" as Elkins tells us it must (Elkins 2004, 47).

Some of the most prominent recent art with religious content that does appear in art history textbooks seems to conform to some of these postmodern conventions. Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ," a photo of a crucifix in the artist's urine, and Chris Ofili's painting "The Holy Virgin Mary," of a dark skinned Virgin Mary with elephant dung and pornographic cutouts, at minimum express "second thoughts" of the artist about religion. And the ways the religious images are presented could plausibly be seen as an ironic

stance through the incongruity of the juxtaposition of a "holy" object – the crucifix – with the very non-holy artist's urine, and the image of the "holy" Virgin Mary with the very non-holy dung and pornography.

There are ways that institutions can support and enforce these conventions. According to Elkins, a student who wasn't "savvy" about Serrano's "Piss Christ" would not normally be admitted to the Chicago Art Institute (Elkins 2004, 29). And he tells us that while there are religious students and a Christian student's association at the institute, they "do not often make openly religious art; either they find ways to reconcile contemporary art with their religious beliefs, or else they apply only to more practical departments like Historical Preservation, Visual Communication or Fashion, where they can keep their religious art more or less to themselves, while learning practical skills" (Elkins 2004, 29).

There is much more to be said about the influence of postmodern theory on the conventions in the visual arts, but these commitments and their associated conventions would lead us to expect that there would be little or no sincere religious art in an art niche that accepts this theoretical approach. The contemporary art niche that rejects what are seen as dominant ideologies and status hierarchies, and favors irony and self-critique, will almost certainly contain few works of art that are sincere expressions of religious, theistic belief.

Theistic Art Niches?

This way of thinking about religion and art in terms of the theory, conventions, and institutions of an art niche can help us understand the trend away from religious art in the art history textbooks. But it also suggests the possibility that at a single time there may be multiple art niches – each with its own distinctive institutions, theories, and conventions that govern the making and experience of art. If so, there may be other art niches that are not atheistic in the same way. In 2012 the Reverend Lord Harries gave a lecture sponsored by Gresham College at the Museum of London (Harries 2012). The introduction to this lecture addresses and disputes the apparent disappearance of religious art: "Contrary to much opinion, the current scene of faith-related art is very much alive. There are new commissions for churches and cathedrals, a number of artists pursue their work on the basis of a deeply convinced faith, and other artists resonate with traditional Christian themes, albeit in a highly untraditional way." In his lecture,

he presented images of ninety-seven paintings and sculptures with religious content and function, by fourteen twentieth-century artists.

Harries does not tell us explicitly about an alternative theistic art niche with its own distinctive set of concepts, theories, practices, conventions, and institutions, so we cannot tell if there really are any theistic art niches in play here. But two entries from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* indicate something like an art niche. Here we are told that painting has been part of Mormon culture since the beginning of the religion in the 1840s (Oman 1992, 70), and that the Church began encouraging artists in the late 1880s to travel to France for further study (Peacock 1992, 73). The purpose of art is primarily to "enlighten" and "inspire" its members, and the technique and style are determined by how well they serve this purpose, rather than merely conforming to fashions in the dominant art niche: "Even though LDS artists have been aware of contemporary trends in art, they have generally chosen not to follow the current avant-garde fashion" (Peacock 1992, 75). Instead, the values at play here are for "the narrative tradition in painting, a reverence for nature, absence of nihilism, support of traditional societal values, respect for the human body, a strong sense of aesthetic structure and rigorous craftsmanship" (Oman 1992, 70). In such a niche, we would expect that the values, practices, and conventions at play also favor the expression of sincere religious belief and religious functioning, rather than irony and critical attention.

Conclusion

We began with the conventional textbook art history of the tradition that originated around the Mediterranean, and that seems to reveal decreasing religious content and function over time, until now the only religious content seems to be transgressive. But a closer look reveals that sincere religious art is still being produced and appreciated. It is just that this religious art does not appear in conventional art textbooks, is not taught in art institutes and at universities, and is not commonly exhibited in established art museums. I have argued here that we can understand this trend in terms of the functioning of atheistic and theistic art niches, instead of some single, overarching artworld. What seems to be the dominant art niche has become increasingly atheistic over time, with art concepts and theories, practices, conventions, and institutions that reject the expression of sincere theistic belief. But much more work is needed to understand precisely what is going on here. A careful examination of art niches, both theistic and atheistic, will help us better understand how specific niches function, and how niches

function in general. How discrete and independent are they? How do they maintain practices and conventions? How do they change? What role do institutions play within a niche? How do art niches interact with the culture as a whole?

The analysis here is not intended as a defense of the artwork in either theistic or atheistic art niches. The evaluation of art in each niche is at least in part internal, and in some sense trivial, in that the concepts, values, practices, and conventions of each niche automatically favor the artwork produced within that niche. So transgressive art is automatically better in a postmodern niche than art that is a sincere expression of theistic belief. It would be no surprise that from the perspective of a postmodern niche, as Elkins pointed out in the quote above, sincere religious art is not very good. It violates accepted practices, conventions, and rules, and it is not favored by prevailing theories of art. In a theistic niche, on the other hand, art that expresses sincere belief and functions in the right way in religious contexts is automatically better than ironic, transgressive art.

But can we evaluate artwork on grounds that are independent of the evaluative criteria – the theories, conventions, and practices – of a particular niche? Is niche-independent evaluation possible? Moreover, can we evaluate an art niche itself? Is an atheistic art niche better than a theistic one? These questions cannot be adequately addressed here (see Richards [2017; 2019] for some discussion about how we might go about answering evaluative questions about niches), but we might plausibly think that if there is evidence for the existence of a God or set of gods, that evidence counts in favor of a theistic art niche. And, on the other hand, we might think that the evidence leads in the other direction, away from the existence of a God or set of gods, that favors an atheistic art niche. But that discussion is for another time and place.

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41

Film and Television

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To speak of the relationship between atheism, on one hand, and film and television, on the other, is a thorny endeavor. There are, after all, a plethora of variables to consider. A given filmmaker might hold atheistic beliefs but make movies with obvious religious import – for example, the great Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose 1964 film *The Gospel According to Matthew* [*Il vangelo secondo Matteo*] was dedicated to Pope John XXIII. Conversely, another filmmaker might be a well-known theist but release movies that highlight atheistic characters and themes – to wit, Martin Scorsese, who has explored godlessness in films such as *Mean Streets* (1973), *The Departed* (2006), and even in ostensibly religious works such as *Silence* (2016).

There is also the problem of audience reception. In 2017, the website Taste of Cinema published an article entitled "The ten best atheist movies of all time." Yet, while each of the ranked films contain atheistic themes, it is by no means clear that they can be defined as "atheist movies." *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979), placed fifth on Taste of Cinema's list, is said to be "blasphemous" (Fraser 2017). But other commentators, including members of the Monty Python comedy troupe, present a more nuanced interpretation. Terry Jones, who also directed *The Life of Brian*, argues that "the film is heretical, but it's not blasphemous" (Monty Python 2014). John Cleese is even more hesitant. "I don't think it's a heresy," he adds, "it's not attacking the Church . . . it's about people who cannot agree with each other" (Monty Python 2014).

When one of the "ten best atheist movies of all time" is not obviously atheistic, one might reasonably conclude that the very notion of an "atheist movie" is problematic. Indeed, a recent Atheist Film Festival in San Francisco established a rather modest criterion for determining its selections – "that [a given film] shows at least one atheist figure in a positive light" (Winston 2012). But here again the matter of defining an

"atheist figure" or even "a positive light" is imprecise, so the Atheist Film Festival mostly featured documentaries about religious fundamentalism and hot-button political issues such as school prayer. It also added a few "heretic friendly" (Winston 2012) feature narrative films such as *The Invention of Lying* (2009) and *Salvation Boulevard* (2011). However, since both of these works were critical flops (and *Salvation Boulevard* flopped at the box office as well), their status as "atheist movies" adds another layer of complexity to this task. Just as an essay on "theism and film" would likely eschew or, at least, devote fleeting attention to the much-maligned *God's Not Dead* franchise (2014–18), so it seems a piece on "atheism and film" must sift out mediocre examples in order to focus on the proper issue.

In light of the wider hermeneutical problems of authorial intent, audience reception, and aesthetic reputation – problems that outstrip the relatively narrow question of atheism's relation to film and television – perhaps the best way to begin probing this conundrum is to go back to the origins of cinema. Cinema was first distinguished by its ability to record movement in the natural world and to represent it to spectators. For that reason, the French inventor Léon Bouly called one of the medium's earliest technological devices *le cinématographe*, because it allowed its user "to write" [*graphein*] "movement" [*kinema*]. This capacity soon opened up debate about the nature and purpose of film and, in turn, its relation (or lack thereof) to religion. This chapter's first part will focus on the practical and theoretical aspects of this question. It will be seen that, even as film theorists pondered what Walter Benjamin termed cinema's "*intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment*" (Benjamin 2008, 35), religious institutions took sociopolitical action to restrict just how "reality" was portrayed. Next, this chapter will explore why western culture eventually moved away from such cinematic restrictions. Though this shift was partly (if not exclusively) advanced by religious communities, it will be shown that, in turn, atheism began to emerge as a vital theme in film and on television. A few examples of this emergence will be explored, illustrating how films such as *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and television series such as *M*A*S*H** (1972–83) wrestled with the possibility of godlessness. As mentioned, however, that does not mean that western society has arrived at a full-blown "atheist cinema." In conclusion, it will be argued that contemporary cinema – whether in theaters or, increasingly, on the small screen via streaming websites such as Netflix – is characterized by *pluralism*. In this context, neither theism nor atheism dominate the cinematic landscape. Instead, following the insights of noted sociologist Peter L. Berger, these

two *Weltanschauungen* must coexist, encouraging persons to consider the questions at hand and to come to a decision for themselves.

The Origins of Cinema

Cinema did not arrive instantaneously, as if it were the product of a single mind. Rather, it developed through a slow process of trial and error. For example, in 1646, the German Jesuit priest and scientist Athanasius Kircher published *The Great Art of Light and Shadow* [*Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*], advocating "the practical use of screen technology" (Musser 1990, 17). Kircher had experimented with a device known as the "magic lantern," and his text was meant to explain what it is and how it works, so that spectators would not understand it to be paranormal. This clarification "was a necessary condition of screen entertainment," allowing the projected images to be seen not "as magic but as 'art'" (Musser 1990, 18).

Further experiments with the magic lantern led to the exposition of sequential images. The Belgian polymath Étienne-Gaspard Robert (popularly known as "Robertson") was famed in post-revolutionary Paris for his phantasmagoria – early versions of horror theater in which magic lanterns were trundled in order to adjust image size, and "mechanical slides" were used "to give a sense of motion" to images such as "the face of a specter" (Barber 1989, 76). By the late nineteenth century, technical innovations by figures such as Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers led to the arrival of the first cinematic apparatuses, which projected "photographic images . . . in quick succession giving the illusion of continuity" (Usai 1996, 6). Initially, this development was seen as a curiosity. In May 1893, at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, the Edison Manufacturing Company premiered *Blacksmith Scene*, "the first commercial-length modern motion-picture subject to be publicly exhibited" (Musser 1990, 72). Following a demonstration, members of the audience waited in line for a chance to view the thirty-four-second film through Edison's Kinetoscope – a device that allowed films to be viewed singly through a peephole viewer. Yet, over the next couple of decades, cinema became a proper industry, involving "a number of large production and distribution companies, based in major cities, who first sold and then increasingly rented films to exhibitors all over the world" (Pearson 1996, 13). Around the same time, the Los Angeles suburb of Hollywood emerged as the center of American and, eventually, global cinema. New cinematic standards were thereby established, not just in business, but also in

terms of filmmaking, as "Hollywood cinema favored consistency, verisimilitude, and a linear narrative structure" (Musser 1990, 4).

The development and expansion of the film industry elicited a variety of cultural responses. One important outcome was the advent of film theory, which, at first, was prompted by the "overriding assumption that . . . [film's] popular appeal and its commercial and technological foundations necessarily meant it was antithetical to art or culture in its proper sense" (McDonald 2016, 9). The process of legitimizing film's artistic and intellectual merits took decades, especially in American culture. Whereas France's film culture was established as early as the 1910s, the American poet Vachel Lindsay penned an apologetic for cinema in 1915. Entitled *The Art of the Moving Picture*, it argued with "evangelical zeal" that cinema "had the power to kindle spiritual renewal, and to nurture prophetic visions that would guide viewers to a utopian promised land" (McDonald 2016, 14). A year later, the Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg published *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, lending scholarly gravitas to the still-emerging medium. Münsterberg argues that cinema has evolved from a vehicle of mimesis – that is, a medium that straightforwardly conveys external reality – to a complex technological *shaping* of reality: "[Film's] central aesthetic value is directly opposed to the spirit of imitation. A work of art . . . cannot avoid some imitation. But *it becomes art just in so far as it overcomes reality, stops imitating and leaves the imitated reality behind*" (Münsterberg 2002, 114–15).

In time, the cinematic tension between mimesis and transformation became central to film theory. On the one hand stood "formalists" such as Münsterberg and, later, Rudolf Arnheim, who maintained that cinema is distinguished from other arts by its technological method and structure. On the other hand stood "realists" such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, who insisted that "film's verisimilitude should be its defining feature" (McDonald 2016, 19). In particular, realists tended to emphasize cinema's cooperative relation to the material world. Cinema, insists Kracauer, "is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates toward it" (Kracauer 2004, 144). This is "the basic aesthetic principle" of the medium, which the filmmaker's "formative tendencies" are to enhance rather than overwhelm (Kracauer 2004, 152). Bazin went a step further, developing an "ontology" of the technically mediated image. He argues that, in photography as in cinema, "an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man" (Bazin 2004, 168). Thus "the cinema is objectivity in time," possessing a singular "power to lay bare the realities" (Bazin 2004, 169).

Both Kracauer and Bazin had notable religious backgrounds – the former in Judaism, the latter in Catholicism – and their realist aesthetics can be traced back to what Bazin called "faith in reality" (Bazin 2005, 24). Yet, just how this "faith" should be translated to celluloid turned out to be less than straightforward. Bazin's most obvious disciples would be the *autori* of Italian neorealist cinema – for example, Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini – who sought to foster a more authentic sense of reality by using non-professional actors, filming on location, and turning their cameras to the ordinary, seemingly trivial moments of life. But Bazin's perspective was also influential outside the so-called "Golden Age" of Italian cinema. In 1972, Paul Schrader – a Master's student at the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, later known for his collaborations with the great American director Martin Scorsese – penned a thesis entitled *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. According to Schrader, cinema has the potential for religious-cum-spiritual transcendence, but this capacity emerges just to the extent that the filmmaker quietly attends to reality: "Cinema may have freed the other arts from their desire to imitate life, as Bazin and [Wylie] Sypher contend, but it did not free itself" (Schrader 1972, 159).

Still, if the sparse and even mystical aesthetic of neorealist cinema represented one way of concentrating on reality, the notion that film possesses verisimilitude also proved controversial. Debate first emerged in the early 1920s, when a series of drug and sex scandals rocked the film industry: "The conduct of the stars [such as Wallace Reid and Mary Pickford] and the content of the movies confirmed for critics that Hollywood was the modern Babylon" (Black 1997, 9). As a result, Hollywood studio executives formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), tapping the conservative politician Will Hays to lead "campaigns to combat censorship bills at the federal and state level" (Black 1997, 9). More specifically, Hays sought to restore public faith in the film industry, thereby silencing calls for the governmental regulation of cinema. To that end, he encouraged the MPPDA to adopt a code of morality to which American films would have to comply – an aspiration that was realized in 1930, when studio heads agreed to abide by what became known as the "Production Code." The Code not only aimed to limit what could be depicted on screen but also sought to promote traditional Christian values. For example, profanity and nudity were prohibited, while authority figures, especially clergy, were to be treated as noble and upright. Religious faith – and, by association, theism – were declared unassailable.

Indeed, a number of the major figures behind the Production Code and its application were Catholic. Martin Quigley, an American Catholic film journalist and publisher, lobbied for the popular Jesuit author Daniel Lord to draft the Code as such. Moreover, when Lord's resolutions met with resistance among Hollywood leaders, a pressure group was formed – the National Legion of Decency, a largely but not exclusively Catholic organization that "congealed into the most feared of all private protest groups bedeviling Hollywood" (Doherty 2007, 57). Operating on a grassroots level, the Legion managed to persuade thousands of Christian moviegoers to sign an oath promising "to remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Christian morality" (Doherty 2007, 57). It was a successful tactic. Hollywood saw a decline in box office revenue, and, by the mid-1930s, the MPDDA was compelled to observe the Code – an effort subsequently spearheaded by the new Production Code Administration (PCA). All films were to be vetted by the PCA prior to release. This process was supervised by Joseph Breen, a Catholic layman, who was at the forefront of the Code's administration until 1954.

Indeed, so prominent was this issue at the time that Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical letter on cinema. Entitled *Vigilanti Cura* ("vigilant care") and published in June 1936, it begins by extolling the efforts of the Legion of Decency but later reflects on film itself. According to the Pope, the popularity of cinema must not be allowed to obscure the challenging moral problems it raises. The masses "who work under the fatiguing conditions of modern industry" seek recreation in movie theaters, but, in doing so, they find themselves subjected to "picture plays calculated to inflame the passions and to arouse the lower instincts latent in the human heart" (Pius XI 1936). These temptations are heightened by the medium itself:

> The power of the motion picture consists in this, that it speaks by means of vivid and concrete imagery which the mind takes in with enjoyment and without fatigue. Even the crudest and most primitive minds which have neither the capacity nor the desire to make the efforts necessary for abstraction or deductive reasoning are captivated by the cinema. In place of the effort which reading or listening demands, there is the continued pleasure of a succession of concrete and, so to speak, living pictures. (Pius XI 1936)

When "increased by training and embellished by every known art," cinema's "vigour of realism" can "assume the most morbid forms" and lead to moral corruption, particularly among the youth. It is imperative, then, that cinematic reality reflect a Christian worldview, featuring "notions and sentiments

of justice and rectitude, of duty and obligation and of ideals of life" (Pius XI 1936). For only in that way can a Christian *world* be preserved. As the Pope concludes: "Since then the cinema is in reality a sort of object lesson which, for good or for evil, teaches the majority of men more effectively than abstract reasoning, it must be elevated to conformity with the aims of a Christian conscience and saved from depraving and demoralizing effects" (Pius XI 1936).

If *Vigilanti Cura* can be seen as underwriting the pre-war Christian consensus on the film industry, the encyclical's standpoint increasingly appeared obsolete by the 1950s. The reasons behind this shift are multitudinous and thus exceed the present discussion. What is certain, nevertheless, is that the metaphysical and moral ambiguity raised by the World Wars of the twentieth century shook western society and, in turn, Christianity. Consequently, the neo-scholastic austerity that marked the Church's initial reaction to the innovations of modernity slowly but surely yielded to a more sympathetic (if no less controversial) response. This shift was already emergent in the 1950s – several years before the convocation of the Second Vatican Council – when the Office Catholique Internationale du Cinéma (OCIC) began to encourage film study and to establish juries at international film festivals. These tasks implied that cinema in and of itself merited attention and was meant to be more than a vehicle of ecclesial teaching. Further, many Catholic leaders came to judge that "the Legion of Decency was hopelessly out of step with the modern cinema" (Black 1997, 177). For example, the chairman of the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures, William A. Scully, Bishop of Albany, issued a "call for a Catholic program of cinematic literacy" (Black 1997, 179). His views were advanced when, in 1957, Pope Pius XII published the encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* ("wonderful invention"), which did not so much contradict *Vigilanti Cura* as adopt a more positive tone toward cinema. Catholic leaders began to accept, and even insist, that filmmaking and filmgoing were matters of individual conscience (Black 1997, 241). These changes marked the proverbial "beginning of the end" for the Legion of Decency. In 1965, it was renamed the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures (NCOMP) and, finally, sank into irrelevance.

It is easy to mock the hamfisted Legion of Decency, but, seen from a certain perspective, its concerns were understandable. The Legion of Decency viewed cinema not as a vehicle of individual self-expression but as a conveyor or guardian of a normative vision of reality. The decline of the Legion of Decency, then, marked the decline of that way of thinking. Films representing a Christian worldview would still be made, but so would films

that called Christianity into question. Thus, films exploring atheism could now be made and promoted.

Atheism in Cinema and on Television

According to Nina Power, "surprisingly little has been written about the relationship between atheism and film at the formal or conceptual level" (Power 2013, 727). Moreover, even the little that *has* been written is ambiguous. Power notes that some commentators have understood "cinema as in some sense capable of emulating or replacing religious practice and belief," while others stress "its potential as a vehicle for atheist critique" (Power 2013, 727). In the former case, one might note that "to enter the cinema is to give oneself over to an experience that shares some curious parallels with religious ritual"; in the latter case, one might view film as a "kind of distraction" that supplants "a theological mode of 'contemplation'" (Power 2013, 728–9). Here, Power does not refer to Jean-Louis Baudry – who famously has argued that cinema is necessarily ideological, since, as in Plato's allegory of the cave, it involves the technological fabrication of "an illusion of reality" to which the viewer "is the prey of an impression" (Baudry 2004, 209) – but her conclusion seems to appropriate and modify that of the French theorist. "Plato's cave analogy is itself cinematic," Power argues, "and many have followed the image: cinema is thus a nonreligious practice of mesmerizing audiences, of distracting them from the world outside, which is no longer Plato's realm of the Forms but perhaps what we would call 'real life'" (Power 2013, 728). Yet, whereas Baudry worries that the cinematic apparatus is a tool of manipulation, Power treats it as a source of liberation, since it replaces the rigidity of religious systems "with something altogether more fleeting and uncertain" (Power 2013, 729).

Of course, whether or not the ongoing decline of religion in the west is liberating remains a hotly debated question. Still, Power is right that, in the wake of the Legion of Decency, the direction of cinema became less certain. Filmmakers were no longer bound to a particular way of representing the world, and so the market was open, as it were, to a host of cinematic objectives and viewpoints. The 1960s witnessed an explosion of movies that hitherto would have been prohibited from release. For instance, pornographic cinema was made as early as the turn of the twentieth century (Lewis 2000, 196) – the "stag films" popular at the day's brothels serve as a case in point – but it was unable to reach the mainstream. However, as censorship laws collapsed in Europe and then in North America, sexually

explicit films became an ordinary feature of western cinema. The Adult Film Association of America was founded in 1969, and, in the early 1970s, a string of pornographic films achieved wide theatrical release, including *Deep Throat* (1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973). A similar trend can be found among so-called "exploitation films." Though niche and taboo subjects had long been explored by filmmakers, "splatter films" such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and "Blaxploitation films" such as *Shaft* (1971) gave rise to the "cult film" phenomenon, whereby transgressive and controversial movies became popular and, in some cases, developed a participatory subculture.

Increased permissiveness also applied to films featuring atheism: What once was deemed taboo was now generally tolerated. This trend began in Europe and soon spread to North America. A great example in this connection was *The Seventh Seal* [*Det sjunde inseglet*], written and directed by the Swedish *auteur*, Ingmar Bergman. The son of a Lutheran pastor, Bergman rebelled "against his parents' strict morality" and "left home at 19 to become a stage director" (Kemp 1996, 572). His first feature film as a writer-director was *Crisis* [*Kris*, 1946], and he soon garnered a reputation for using "the cinema as an instrument of sustained philosophical meditation" (Kemp 1996, 573). In particular, Bergman was associated with "existentialism," though he himself never claimed to be a student of the movement (Livingston 2009, 127). Still, a number of his films explore the tensions raised by "existentialist" thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, including, above all, the problem of whether or not God exists. While some existentialist writers critique modern optimism about human nature and society, thereby entering a religious "path of negation, a modern *via negativa*" (Pattison 1999, 5), others view the divine as a projection of what Nietzsche called "the will to power" [*der Wille zur Macht*]. Bergman himself wrestled with these respective viewpoints, and this struggle is apparent in *The Seventh Seal* – a film that, if not necessarily antireligious, nevertheless gave atheism credibility on the silver screen.

Set in medieval Denmark, *The Seventh Seal* centers on Atononius Block (Max von Sydow), a knight who has just returned from the Crusades, only to find his homeland wasted by the plague. In the film's most indelible imagery, Block experiences repeated encounters with Death (Bengt Ekerot), personified as a wan, hooded figure cloaked in black. The two begin a protracted chess match, which takes place intermittently throughout the film, as Block and his acerbic squire Jöns (Gunnar Björnstrand) wander about the countryside. They come to befriend a loving young family, who Block helps flee from Death. Such good deeds, Block concludes, are what give life meaning. Hence,

when Death at last comes for him, Block is able to meet it with a measure of peace. In the celebrated final scene, one of the members of the young family – Jof (Nils Poppe), an itinerant actor who possesses extrasensory perception – sees Block and his party in a *Danse Macabre*, following Death up a distant hill.

The Seventh Seal is, indeed, "a metaphysical allegory" (Kemp 1996, 572), but it also stands as a harbinger of the *film d'art* that would take "shape in Europe in the 1960s" (Nowell-Smith 1996, 567). This art cinema was distinguished by its "openness to a variety of experiences" (Nowell-Smith 1996, 567), whether in terms of sexuality, violence, or, in the case of *The Seventh Seal*, godlessness. Throughout the film, Block questions God's existence. "I call out to Him in the darkness," the knight tells Death, "but it's as if no one was there." When Death suggests that God's silence is tantamount to God's absence, Block replies, "Then life is a preposterous horror. No man can live faced with Death, knowing everything's nothingness." Indeed, Block does not revel in his atheism but is tormented by it. "I want knowledge!" he complains. Yet, the knowledge he seeks is elusive, and, for most of the film, he is an icon of existential dread – neither trusting in God nor forgetting him:

> Why does [God] hide in a cloud of half-promises and unseen miracles? How can we believe in the faithful when we lack faith? What will happen to us who want to believe, but cannot? What about those who neither want to nor can believe? Why can't I kill God in me? Why does He live on in me in a humiliating way, despite my wanting to evict Him from my heart? Why is He, despite all, a mocking reality I can't be rid of?

In this way, *The Seventh Seal* strikes a balance between atheism and theism: "What Bergman incorporates in the visual and literary philosophizing of *The Seventh Seal* is not reducible to either of these alternatives" (Singer 2009, 115). But precisely therein lies its import. Though he later would extol the superiority of atheism (Singer 2009, 116), Bergman utilized *The Seventh Seal* for a more subtle if no less revolutionary purpose – to present atheism as a viable and, indeed, sympathetic *Weltanschauung*.

In the wake of *The Seventh Seal* – not to mention Bergman's other great films of religious doubt, including *Through a Glass Darkly* [*Såsom i en spegel*, 1961] and *Winter Light* [*Nattvardsgästerna*, 1962] – other filmmakers began to openly treat atheistic ideas and themes. Stanley Kramer's *Inherit the Wind* (1960) presents a fictionalized adaptation of the famous Scopes Monkey Trial. Critically acclaimed and nominated for four Academy Awards, it (fairly or unfairly) served to popularize the notion that modern science is superior to traditional religion, both on an intellectual and moral level. Subsequent

releases in "science fiction" furthered such a perspective. *Planet of the Apes* (1968), directed by Franklin Schaffner, features Dr. Zaius, "Defender of the Faith," who uses religion to suppress scientific knowledge among his simian people. Later in 1968, the American director Stanley Kubrick released *2001: A Space Odyssey*, widely hailed as one of the best films in cinematic history. It is a notoriously long and labyrinthine work, which can be divided into various "chapters" on human evolution, from a pre-linguistic state of nature to an advanced (and, curiously, almost post-linguistic) society in which human beings are threatened by their own technological development. Kubrick was adamant that *2001* "would require spectators to fill in gaps as they subjectively react to the interplay between image and sound" (Burnette-Bletsch 2013, 3). Hence, while *2001* is not an explicitly atheistic film, it does offer a vision of prehistoric humanity that is ostensibly at odds with the Bible's creation narrative (Burnette-Bletsch 2013, 4–5). Around the same time, another seminal American filmmaker began his career – namely, Woody Allen. Initially working within the genres of farce and slapstick, Allen turned to more philosophically oriented filmmaking in the 1970s, beginning with *Love and Death* (1975) and peaking with *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). In a number of these works, Allen's avowed atheism is on display: "I was born Jewish, but it's the last thing on my mind," Allen quips, "I'm atheistic. I have no interest in any religion in a practicing way, including Judaism – they're all rackets" (quoted in Foundas 2016, 181). The tragicomic *Crimes and Misdemeanors* bears out this perspective; it features a successful yet desperate physician named Judah, who rejects his Jewish upbringing and, after committing a murder, concludes that there are no cosmic consequences for criminality – indeed, that the universe as such is indifferent to human affairs.

Needless to say, this catalog of atheistic films is not exhaustive, nor can the "atheism" displayed in these works be understood in univocal fashion. For example, while Allen lacks religious faith, he nevertheless concedes that it imbues human life with "the illusion of something permanent, and therefore of meaning and value" (Conard 2004, 18). Other filmmakers, in contrast, treat religion as a force of oppression. Indeed, the situation in cinema roughly correlates to what Stephen Bullivant says of the scholarly problem: "Atheism simply possesses no single, objective definition" (Bullivant 2013, 12). Thus it would be possible to distinguish between negatively atheistic films, which express doubt about the existence of God or gods, and positively atheistic films, which express that there is/are no God or gods (Bullivant 2013, 14–15). And yet – as mentioned at the outset with regard to *The Life of Brian* – even

these finer distinctions are likely to break down, since a filmmaker's intent may not correspond to her audience's reception (or vice versa). Moreover, characters within the *same* film often present competing metaphysical viewpoints: one character may be a positive atheist, another a negative atheist, and a third a believing theist – a tension found in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, despite Allen's personal adherence to positive atheism.

In the end, then, cinematic treatments of atheism certainly became more common in the wake of films such as *The Seventh Seal*, but this trend was multidimensional and should not be taken at face value. The same, it turns out, is true of the portrayal of atheism on television. Often referred to as the "small screen," television's arrival "involved the most extensive and ballyhooed series of public relations events ever staged around any mass medium in American history" (Edgerton 2007, 3). The build-up started in the 1920s, but it would be another decade before the medium became a reality in western cultural life. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) launched regularly scheduled telecasting in late 1936, spurring American leaders "to begin the long and arduous process of bringing television into homes across the nation" (Edgerton 2007, 5). On 30 April 1939, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), led by the enterprising businessman David Sarnoff, presented a live telecast from the New York World's Fair to the New York metropolitan, using a transmitter atop the Empire State Building. The program lasted almost three hours and featured prosaic shots of the assembled crowd and sundry dignitaries, including New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia along with President Franklin Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor. Sales of private television sets immediately followed, though only "an estimated three thousand TVs were sold to the public in 1939" (Edgerton 2007, 15).

In fact, it was not until after World War II that television came to impact American society. Yet, in the end, its slow gestation did not curtail its influence. Due to a host of factors, from improving technology to postwar demographic changes, television soon "dominated popular entertainment" (Fuller-Seeley 2007, 102). In 1946, there were 20,000 television sets in the United States; that number swelled to over 30 million by 1955 (Fuller-Seeley 2007, 103). As demand increased so did supply: there were six television stations in the United States in 1946, five of which were bunched together along the Eastern seaboard; by 1955 there were 458 stations scattered across the nation (Fuller-Seeley 2007, 103). The rapid spread of television led to social changes and, with them, public controversy. Critics complained that this new "glowing box" was bound to wreak societal difficulties, including male

voyeurism and female nonconformity (Fuller-Seeley 2007, 94). Most worrisome of all was the new medium's influence on children:

> Inevitably, it was held, youngsters mesmerized by such early TV attractions as "Howdy Doody" would be turned from active "doers" to passive "viewers," from "irresistible forces" to "immovable objects." Their vision and physical development would suffer; they would ignore their schoolwork ... They would be stunted physically, mentally, and emotionally. It was a sad prospect.
>
> (Quoted in Fuller-Seeley 2007, 94)

Suddenly, the distractions of radio and cinema seemed almost benign: "Educators' investigations found that children immensely preferred the new pastime to any other recreation, including radio listening, comic book reading, and movie going" (Fuller-Seeley 2007, 94). The hope had been that television would function as an "electronic hearth," serving as a focal point for family life; however, by the early 1960s, it was clear that television had a tranquilizing effect on many consumers (Fuller-Seeley 2007, 92, 108–9). People preferred it to conversation, exercise, and work.

Some thought to counter this trend by developing educational programming. "Television is a miracle [that] must be used to upgrade humanity across a broad base," pronounced Pat Weaver, an executive with the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), in 1954 (quoted in Edgerton 2007, 158). In reality, however, idealists such as Weaver were doomed to disappoint. The medium could not be strictly educational and appreciably lucrative at the same time, and so executives had to juggle between highbrow shows such as *Wisdom* (1957–65), news broadcasts such as *Today* (1952–), children's series such as *The Howdy Doody Show* (1947–60), and vaudevillian variety programs such as *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948–71). Typically, such productions were conventional and hackneyed, and when they happened to prove controversial – as when Elvis Presley appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the mid-1950s – great care was taken to avoid offending audiences. Moreover, this trend would continue well into the 1960s: "Most television entertainment during the mid to late 1960s disguised current events in the usual assortment of familiar and comforting formulas, even resorting to far-out fantasies at times, before inching its way toward relevancy by the end of the decade" (Edgerton 2007, 237). Hence, at the same time that *auteurs* such as Bergman and Kubrick were challenging cinematic audiences with films about atheism, nihilism, and sexuality, television was just beginning to confront provocative topics. Its role was not so much to provoke audiences as to shelter them.

Of course, as is now clear in the age of *Game of Thrones* (2010–19), television has changed a great deal in the ensuing decades. Its transformation commenced in the late 1960s, when TV's three major networks – ABC (American Broadcasting Company), CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), and NBC – began covering controversial news stories, including the Tet Offensive (1968) of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal (1972–4). Suddenly, television was a part of the *Zeitgeist*, and network programming would soon follow suit, slowly but surely discarding shows that appealed to older and rural audiences (for example, *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Gunsmoke*) and favoring those targeting "young, urban professionals" (Edgerton 2007, 275). This new generation of programs not only broached hot-button social issues, but made politics central to their purpose. Feminism, marital breakdown, racism, and war – these and other topics moved from the intelligentsia to the television mainstream. The same, indeed, was true of atheism. Once unthinkable for small-screen audiences, now it would crop up with increasing frequency.

A good example of this trend was the sitcom *All in the Family*. Premiering in January 1971, the show centered on the Bunker family – a working-class household in Queens, headed by the surly and misanthropic patriarch Archie (Carroll O'Connor). In one sense, Archie was not all that different from previous characters on network television. For example, he has the churlish attitude and scruffy appearance of Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason) from *The Honeymooners* (1955–6). What distinguished Archie, then, was not his blue-collar coarseness but, rather, his unseemly and seemingly "uncensored" commentary on contemporary American social and political life: "Archie frequently erupted in a nonstop stream of racial and ethnic slurs, calling blacks 'jungle-bunnies,' Jews 'hebes,' and Puerto Ricans 'spics'" (Edgerton 2007, 276). Yet, in spite of his loud bark, Archie's bite did not go unopposed in the Bunker home. His faithful wife Edith (Jean Stapleton) would disarm him with her generosity and patience, while his daughter Gloria (Sally Struthers) and son-in-law Michael (Rob Reiner), representing a younger and more liberal generation, would directly challenge his views. The tension between Archie and Michael was particularly mined for comedy – a tactic that occasionally touched on religious questions and, indeed, on atheism.

The best example of this tendency came in "The Little Atheist," an episode that aired on 24 November 1975 during *All in the Family*'s sixth season. The episode takes place on Thanksgiving Day. The Bunker family has gathered at Gloria and Michael's new home, when, over casual conversation, the young couple reveal that they do not plan to raise their unborn child in the church. Although not personally devout, the Protestant Archie immediately chides Michael: "Just because you're an atheist, ya know, don't mean that my

grandchild has got to be gypped out of his religion!" (Kirk 2014). Michael responds that his primary intention is to give the child freedom to explore religious questions without outside interference, but Archie counters that that is a dangerous idea, opposing both societal norms and divine command: "He give the Bronx cheer to the Lord," Archie tells Edith, as they storm out of the house, "So help me! And he's going to bring up our grandson to do the same thing" (Kirk 2014). Still, Archie must come to accept a compromise. The rest of the family, including Edith in the end, believes that the decision about religious upbringing belongs solely to Michael and Gloria. Thus Archie, repudiating "this Den of Inquisitry," vows to take the child to church on the sly: "We're gonna raise that grandson of ours a Christian if we gotta break every commandment to do it!" (Kirk 2014).

While "The Little Atheist" stops short of arguing for atheism as such, it does introduce a number of themes that have come to mark the advance of atheism in American society. First, the episode portrays Christians – Archie in particular, but also Edith in a more subtle fashion – as clinging more to social convention than to genuine religious faith. Their Christianity has traditional, but not supernatural, purchase. Second, it suggests that atheism is more progressive than Christian theism, not only because it has the courage to question societal norms, but also because it respects individual autonomy. Third, in as much as Archie lacks a college education and Michael is a burgeoning academic, it correlates religion and ignorance on one hand and atheism and erudition on the other. Finally, it sets up a contrast between Archie's hypocrisy and Michael's conviction: Archie professes to be a Christian but lies and swears, while the "heathen" Michael treats others with respect. It is true, of course, that Archie is a comic figure, but his folly might be especially damning of theism: One is invited to laugh at, rather than empathize with, Christians such as Archie.

While *All in the Family* managed to make atheism central to the dynamic within the Bunker family, other popular shows of the era incorporated atheistic themes with more subtlety. The war series *M*A*S*H** (1972–83) used "dark comedy to deconstruct sacrosanct or taboo subjects (like death, religion, and sexual promiscuousness)," reflecting "a period in American history when optimism was giving way to pessimism" (Diffrient 2008, 7). Thus the show did not so much attack theism – after all, one of its main characters was Fr. Francis Mulcahy (William Christopher), a Catholic priest and military chaplain – as consistently imply that religious systems cannot sufficiently answer the so-called "problem of evil." Key here is the show's main character, Capt. Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce (Alan Alda), chief surgeon of the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, who

responds to the tragedy he sees with dry martinis and dark humor – a "crazy agnostic," in the affectionate words of Fr. Mulcahy, who questions ecclesial dogma but tolerates religious practice (Diffrient 2008, 32). Another long-running sitcom, *Barney Miller* (1975–82), handled the tension between religion and atheism with similar drollness. In "Moonlighting," an episode from the show's third season, Detective Arthur Dietrich (Steve Landesberg) arrests a Catholic priest for fencing stolen merchandise. The priest admits to the crime and, indeed, does not want to be treated as a special case. But that is exactly what happens. When Barney Miller (Hal Linden), captain of the precinct, asks Sergeant Nick Yemana (Jack Soo) to get "prints and pictures" of the alleged felon, Yemana demurs: "I haven't gone to church in years; there might be repercussions." Miller turns to Dietrich, who is more than willing to do the job: "Do you believe in God?" he asks Miller. The captain responds in the affirmative, to which Dietrich counters: "I don't think there is [a God]. I mean, we're probably just an accident, the result of some unplanned cosmic explosion eons ago." Miller presses his case, suggesting (in almost Pascalian fashion) that atheism is not worth the risk of offending an infinite, omnipotent deity. Dietrich shrugs and replies that, in such an event, he would simply tell God, "Whoops" (Barney Miller 2017).

What must be reiterated here is how quickly atheism evolved onscreen. At one point *verboten*, atheist characters developed into tortured souls, intellectual heroes, and even affable wits. This trend continues today. In films such as *Contact* (1997), *Religulous* (2008), *The Ledge* (2011), and *The Sunset Limited* (2011), atheism and/or atheist characters are featured. Television has seen an even more pronounced change, with several prominent programs showcasing atheistic lead characters, from comedies such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–19) to dramas such as *House* (2004–12) to horror-thrillers such as *The Walking Dead* (2010–). At the same time, however, the portrayals of atheism in these films and series fluctuate and, moreover, rarely dominate. For example, in *The Sunset Limited*, based on the 2006 play by novelist Cormac McCarthy, an atheist and a theist dispute the reality of God's existence and the problem of evil. The atheistic character, a suicidal professor played by Tommy Lee Jones, is represented with compassion and sensitivity but does not necessarily prevail in his debate. Likewise, in *The Big Bang Theory*, the atheistic physicist Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons) frequently spars with his mother Mary (Laurie Metcalf), who is a born-again Christian. While Sheldon is said to have a genius-level IQ and endures as the show's icon, his mother is depicted as a caring and loving matriarch, who had to overcome numerous obstacles in raising him. In the end, then, the two are not adversaries but allies – perhaps the most extraordinary sign of atheism's long development onscreen.

By Way of Conclusion: The Religious Pluralism of Contemporary Cinema

One of the great debates in contemporary western society, particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has involved the status of religion. Where once atheism was viewed as an iconoclastic and even taboo subject, worries about religious fundamentalism have seemingly turned the tables. Surveys suggest that affiliation with institutional religion is rapidly declining, and atheistic authors such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have attained wide and vociferous audiences. Of course, as has been seen, the seeds of these developments antedate 9/11 and can hardly be reduced to a single event or even a few events. Rather, a confluence of factors encompassing nearly all of western society – from demography to philosophy to politics to science and technology – have altered "our most basic conceptions of religion and spirituality, our interpretations of historic religious beliefs and symbols, and perhaps even our understanding of the sacred itself" (Roof 1999, 3). Might we be witnessing the slow but certain demise of *homo religiosus* and, in turn, the rise of a totalizing atheistic culture?

Doubtless some are excited at this prospect and others fearful. In all likelihood, however, the truth is far more untidy than such apocalyptic scenarios imply. Since the 1960s, sociologists of religion and secularity have noted a curious juxtaposition – a pronounced decline of institutional religion on the one hand and an intensifying "inward search for greater spiritual depth" (Roof 1999, 7) on the other. In other words, as more and more church pews are vacant on holy days, so are more and more Americans (and, doubtless, other westerners) reporting that "the influence of religion [is] *increasing in their personal lives*" (Roof 1999, 7). According to Wade Clark Roof, this ostensible paradox does not so much mark "a loss of faith as a qualitative shift from unquestioned belief to a more open, questing mood" (Roof 1999, 9). For Roof, the postmodern western landscape is akin to a "spiritual marketplace," a "quest culture shaped by forces of supply and demand," which has led to the "remaking of religious and institutional loyalties" (Roof 1999, 10).

This trajectory has been adumbrated in the analysis of cinema above. What began as a medium monitored and even bowdlerized by political and religious authorities slowly but surely evolved into a kind of marketplace of ideas and images, where *Weltanschauungen* of all types are on offer, including atheism. Perhaps nothing summarizes this shift better than Netflix – an online media-services supplier that allows its subscribers to stream movies to laptops, smartphones, tablets, and so on. A quick scroll through Netflix's

menu does, indeed, reveal a kind of "spiritual marketplace." There are films about teen nihilism (*Heathers*, 1989), supernatural demonic possession (*Birdbox*, 2018), apocalyptic disaster (*Armageddon*, 1998), religious-themed romance (*The Good Catholic*, 2017), and even one about priests playing soccer (*Que Baje Dios y lo vea*, rendered in English as *Holy Goalie*, 2018). Moreover, for a low monthly cost, one can freely dip into and out of such cinematic fare, sampling the perspectives and styles on offer, perhaps with serious intentions in mind, perhaps just for fun. The bottom line, however, is that the customer pays for the right to craft her own viewing experience. Once the economic exchange takes place, no single worldview is bound to dominate.

Here, Netflix serves as a microcosm that sheds light on the macrocosm: the situation of contemporary cinema is neither theistic nor atheistic. It is *pluralistic*. Whether on the big screen or the small screen, cinema has come to resemble what sociologist Peter L. Berger says of the modern west in general: both are "highly differentiated and segmented, while at the same time allowing for a very high degree of communication between their segmented subsocieties" (Berger 1970, 42). This social pluralism, rather than any "magical inexorability of a 'scientific' world outlook," is the main factor behind the "diminishing plausibility of religious traditions" (Berger 1970, 44). In other words, religion has been relativized but not routed, and the upshot is a culture in which there is "freedom and flexibility in asking questions of truth" (Berger 1970, 42).

The optimistic tone of Berger's analysis belongs to a bygone age, but, in the main, its substantive claim remains valid. This is not an era of religion *or* atheism; it is one of religion *and* atheism. The same, finally, is true in film and television. Where these forms of cinematic media once excluded atheism, now they integrate atheism with religious themes and worldviews. After all, as any good storyteller will admit, tension does not enervate drama but enhances it. Hence, while some theists may long to vanquish atheism, and while some atheists may long to vanquish theism, one can safely assume that Netflix is quite content with the present arrangement.

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PART VII

LIVED ATHEISM IN THE TWENTIETH- AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES: CASE-STUDIES

42

Latin America

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Atheists in Latin America have been and are a small minority. Regardless, they have exerted an important influence in the region; specifically, within the realms of academia, politics, and the arts. In this chapter we study them also in connection with the religiously unaffiliated ("nones"), which include different groupings. First, atheists, who affirm there is no God. Second, agnostics, who think it is not possible to answer the question of God's existence and refrain from giving one. Third, "functional agnostics," who think that if there is a God it has nothing to do with their lives here and now and belief has no consequence of importance in practical terms, which makes them indifferent to religion. Fourth, religiously unaffiliated persons who, while not belonging to a religious organization/tradition, do have religious/spiritual interests, which for some are strongly felt. It is important to bear in mind that people with a definite religious affiliation who do not practice their faith do not belong to the religious "nones" group.

This analysis understands religion in a substantive manner, as actions, beliefs, and institutions predicated upon the assumption of the existence of either supernatural entities with powers of agency or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose, which have the capacity to set the conditions of, or to intervene in human affairs (Bruce 1992). Religion will be seen as an independent variable.

Theoretical Framework and Scope

Any sociological study on atheism requires an understanding of what religion is and how it works. Religion in Latin America has been studied in the light of secularization theory in either its orthodox form or in more idiosyncratic ways that stress structural differentiation, rationalization, the deregulation of

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the religious field, or individualization of belief. Other theories used have been rational choice theory, "popular religiosity," and, more recently, one with a focus on religious practices.

This chapter takes an approach inspired in the ideas by Charles Taylor (2007) and David Martin (1978, 2005) on religion and secularization, and in Margaret Archer's morphogenetic theory (1995). This interpretation (McKenzie 2016) sees changes in religion as a consequence of changes in both social/cultural structures and in groups in society. This is shown through the study of social imaginaries.

According to Taylor (2007), social imaginaries are the ways in which ordinary people imagine their social surroundings. They are composed by both shared self-interpretations as expressed in narratives and symbols, and in social practices. Interpretations and practices reinforce each other. Imaginaries of this kind give people a sense of how things are (factual) and of how they should be (normative). Because of this, social imaginaries not only furnish intellectual and symbolic materials, but also, through practices, sustain social networks which in turn produce social and cultural structures, which also have a life of their own.

Changes allowing ideas and practices of groups of atheists occur at the level of social imaginaries. In them and through them, social and cultural structures are kept alive in social networks (human agency) at the same time that the former exert their conditioning/coercive powers (structural agency). Changes may occur when structures as such lose integrative power, when social groups living under the influence of certain structures find themselves in conflict, or both. In our case, the analysis intends to show how groups of atheists were constrained and found their possibilities to develop changes at the level of social and cultural structures, and actively negotiated their interests and projects with other competing groups.

Although the focus of this study was originally Latin America as a whole, its scope has been narrowed to only include Spanish-speaking Latin American countries, which encompass most of the region's population. This is for two reasons. In the first place, it is only for those countries and Brazil that one would find statistical data on religion gathered for long enough to allow a meaningful study of sociological trends. For most Caribbean countries, and for former English, Dutch, and French colonies in South and Central America, there are just a few surveys available, all of them recent, and a scarce number of studies on religion or atheism. Second, Brazil's social and cultural processes have been significantly more diverse than those of the rest of Latin America, so that studying atheism in Brazil would deserve a separate treatment that is not possible in the limited space here. Just to

mention some facts that make it a different case, the Brazilian religious landscape has been more syncretic than that of other Latin American countries, in part because the Catholic Church in Portugal during colonial times started the process of evangelization later than its Spanish counterpart (Schwaller 2011). Also, religious tolerance laws, Freemasonry, and positivism informed the country in the nineteenth century due to strong convictions of the elites of the Empire of Brazil (1822–89), earlier and to a greater degree than in most countries in the region. Furthermore, at the very beginning of the twentieth century, during the first years of Brazilian republicanism, a project of establishing a "civil religion," although ultimately a failure, was pushed by important political and military leaders animated by positivist views (Montero and Quintanilha 2019), something unique in the Latin American context.

Consequently, this piece analyzes the main sociological trends in regard to atheists in Spanish-speaking Latin America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, offers an interpretation of them in the manner of a narrative, and applies such interpretation to the Peruvian case. In order to achieve its purpose, it also refers to the religiously unaffiliated population.

Sociological Trends

Quantitative information on atheists, and religious "nones" more broadly, has only been systematically collected in the past thirty-five years. In this chapter the following sources will be used: the World Value Survey, which only includes some Latin American countries in wave 6; Latinobarometro, which is an annual survey conducted since 1996 in all of Latin America but Cuba; and the Pew Research Center religion-focused research in the region, conducted in 2014.

Trends

Latinobarometro (2017) shows that the number of atheists in Spanish-speaking Latin America has remained minimal since 1995 to the present, as seen in Figure 42.1, oscillating between 0.3 and 2.4 percent of the whole population in the region. Agnostics have also been minimal, somewhere between 0.1 and 0.5 percent. However, people simply reporting not having a religion have increased almost steadily from 4.2 percent in 1995 to 16.5 percent in 2017. Also included in the population of "nones" is the category of "believer but not part of a church," which oscillates between 3.6 and 0.3 percent, unevenly declining from 1995 to 2017, when it reached 1 percent.

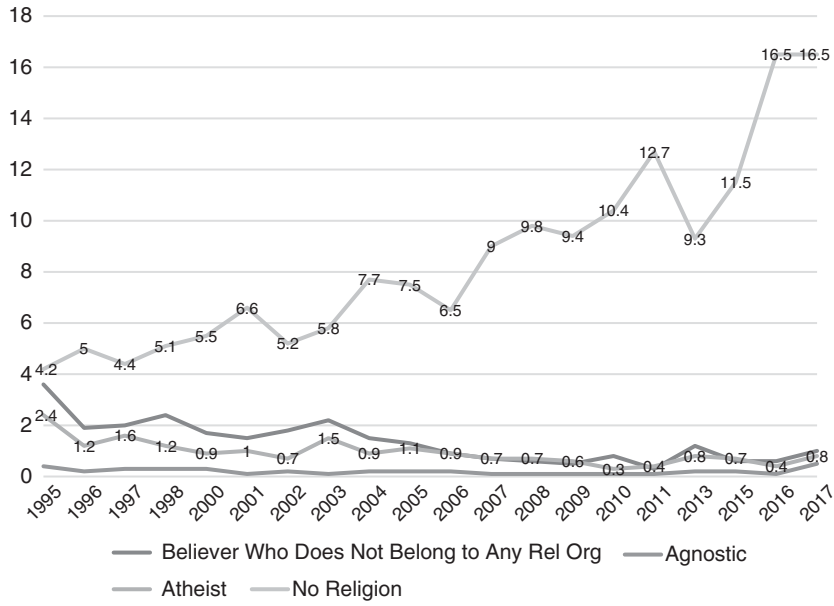

Figure 42.1 Religious "nones" in Spanish-speaking Latin America as a percentage of the population (Source: Latinobarometro 2017).

According to the same database, the countries with the highest numbers of Spanish-speaking Latin American atheists were Uruguay with 7.7 percent, Argentina with 1.7 percent, Peru with 0.9 percent, and Bolivia with 0.7 percent of their populations, as can be seen in Table 42.1. From 1995 to 2017 the average size of the atheist population in the region was 0.94 percent, while that of the "nones" was 10.92 percent.

The countries with the largest proportions of agnostics are Chile with 3.3 percent, Uruguay with 2.8 percent, and Peru with 0.6 percent. Countries reporting the largest number of people saying they have no religious affiliation are Chile with 34.5 percent, Uruguay with 30.6 percent, El Salvador with 30.5 percent, the Dominican Republic with 28 percent, and Nicaragua with 24.6 percent. The category of "believer but not part of a church" is bigger in Uruguay with 10.1 percent, Paraguay with 1.4 percent, and Argentina with 0.9 percent.

Additionally, if we were to rank those countries with the most significant population of "nones" we should mention Uruguay (51.2 percent), Chile (38.6 percent), El Salvador (30.7 percent), Dominican Republic (28.1 percent), Nicaragua (24.6 percent), Argentina (22.1 percent), Costa Rica (15.1 percent),

Table 42.1 Religious "nones" by country (%)

Country	Atheist	Agnostic	No religion	Believer not related to organized religion
Uruguay	7.7	2.8	30.6	10.1
Argentina	1.7	0.2	19.3	0.9
Peru	0.9	0.6	6	0.2
Bolivia	0.7	0.2	2.8	0.8
Colombia	0.6	0.4	10	0.2
Chile	0.5	3.3	34.5	0.3
Mexico	0.3	0.1	10.6	0.2
Paraguay	0.3	0.1	3.4	1.4
Venezuela	0.2	0.1	13.2	0.4
Ecuador	0.2	0	7.1	0
El Salvador	0	0	30.5	0.2
Dom. Republic	0	0	28	0.1
Nicaragua	0	0	24.6	0
Costa Rica	0	0	14.8	0.3
Guatemala	0	0	12.7	0.2
Panama	0	0	6	0
Honduras*	0	0	0.7	0
Brazil**	0.1	0.4	13.9	0.2

* These results are uncertain because 21 percent of respondents answered "Other."
** Also part of the database but not a Spanish-speaking country. Added only to provide a more complete view on Latin America.
Source: Latinobarometro 2017.

Venezuela (13.9 percent), and Guatemala (12.9 percent). Although Cuba has not been included in the survey, some sources estimate that at present the number of atheists and agnostics in the country would not exceed 15 percent (Trujillo 2019).

Sociodemographics

Given the fact that atheists in Spanish-speaking Latin America are very few in number, a cross-national comparative qualitative study would have helped to better understand the characteristics of such groupings. However, we have not found any academic source that fits this description. Working with the quantitative data in Latinobarometro (2017), and rounding up the figures except when dealing with fractions of 1 percent (as we will do from now on for greater clarity), we can say that this group is composed of the following demographics: males (67 percent); middle class (57 percent) or lower middle

class (30 percent) individuals; persons with incomplete or complete high school (41 percent) and incomplete or complete university studies (21 percent). It is mainly a young group: 32 percent are 16–25, 34 percent are 26–40, 23 percent are 41–60, and 12 percent are 61 or older. Additionally, the ethnic makeup is white (50 percent), *mestizo* (30 percent; a mix of white and indigenous), indigenous (9 percent), mulatto (3 percent), black (2 percent), and other races (6 percent). The Pew Research Center (2014) shows that a significant proportion (88 percent) of atheists live in urban environments.

When compared with the whole population, members of this group are 1.4 times more likely to be male, 1.3 times more likely to be middle class, and 1.1 times more likely to be lower middle class. Also, they are 0.9 times more likely to have incomplete and complete high school education and 1.3 times more likely to have incomplete and complete university studies. In regard to age, they are 1.4 times more likely to be 16–25, and 0.8 times more likely, for both age groups, to be 41–60 or 61+. In regard to ethnicity, they are 1.8 times more likely to be white, 0.6 *mestizo*, 0.8 indigenous, 0.5 mulatto, 0.4 black, and 1.8 other races. Lastly, as per the Pew Research Center (2014), they are 1.2 times more likely to be urban dwellers.

Research by the Pew Research Center (2014) also allows for an exploration of "conversions" into atheism. Fifty-five percent of current atheists were raised as Catholic in their childhood, 33 percent were religiously unaffiliated, 7 percent were Protestant/Evangelical, and 4 percent professed other religions. Although a more detailed examination of these figures remains to be done for different age cohorts, these findings show that religiously unaffiliated families are particularly likely to reproduce this irreligiosity in their children, given the fact that the average percentage of the unaffiliated population in Spanish-speaking Latin American countries between 1995 and 2017 was 11 percent (Latinobarometro 2017). A recent study (Bargsted et al. 2019) has found that unaffiliated families are especially effective in raising unaffiliated children in Latin American countries, in more than half of cases.

Unfortunately, the way in which the data have been collected in the above-cited surveys does not allow for an analysis of religious switching from atheism into other ways of relating with religion.

Attitudes and Practices

Atheists' attitudes toward different dimensions of religion are explored by the World Values Survey (2014; henceforth WVS). The WVS wave 6, administered between 2010 and 2014, found the startling fact that 26 percent of self-identified atheists actually believe in God, and 23 percent of them affirm that

religion is very important or rather important in their own lives. The Pew Research Center (2014) shows similar results. This shows a significant "porosity" in the understanding of atheism as a disposition before religion.

Religion is understood by them more as doing good to other people (76 percent) rather than following religious norms and ceremonies (24 percent); more as a means of making sense of living in this world (78 percent) than understanding life after death (22 percent). Belief in hell is affirmed by 14 percent of atheists.

When cognitive claims by science and religion conflict, 87 percent disagree or strongly disagree with those who say that religion is always right. However, as per the Pew Research Center (2014), atheists would be almost equally split when it comes to say if, generally, science and religion are in conflict, with 45 percent affirming it and 46 percent denying it.

In regard to religious practices, according again to the WVS, 9 percent of atheists attend religious services once per year or more, while 27 percent report praying privately once per year or more. Remarkably, 12 percent of them pray several times a week, once per day or more. Finally, 78 percent of atheists in the region disagree or strongly disagree with teaching all religions in public schools.

In summary, sociodemographic variables show atheists in Spanish-speaking Latin America to be a group of predominantly young, white, middle-class males, with varying incomplete or complete high school or university studies. They are also overwhelmingly city dwellers and one-third of them come from families with a religiously unaffiliated outlook. Also, they are an ambiguous group within which one in four believe in God and think religion to be important. Additionally, one in eight prays at least once per week. On the other hand, for most of them religion is about doing good to others and finding meaning in life. About three-quarters of them never pray and an even larger group never attend religious services.

Atheists and the Other "Nones"

It is likely that actual atheists may come less from organized religious groups than from the other sub-categories under our category of religious "nones": agnostics, "functional agnostics," and persons with religious/spiritual drives who resist organized/traditional religion. It might also be that some atheists become members of other "none" groups at some point in their lives or even "revert" to their original disposition toward religion. We should also speak of cases of dual memberships. We have not found studies with a focus on these matters. In any event, these scenarios make it relevant for our argument to

pay some attention to the main characteristics of the other groups within the religious "nones."

The Pew Research Center (2014) allows us a closer look into this group through its category of "unaffiliated" and by only considering those cases where belief in God was affirmed or declared as "unknown," but not denied. This would include the one-quarter of atheists who actually believe in God, which would constitute a case of dual membership.

We found that the provenance of the "nones minus atheists" group members was 47 percent from Catholicism, 31 percent were raised as unaffiliated (for Pew this means atheist, agnostic, or no religion in particular), 17 percent came from Protestant/Evangelical backgrounds, and 3 percent came from other religions. When compared with the whole population, these figures are 0.7 times as many Catholics, 3.3 times unaffiliated, 0.8 times Protestant/Evangelicals, and 1.1 times people of other religions. This means that "nones minus atheists" are more likely than atheists to come from an unaffiliated upbringing, and that unaffiliated families have a strong capacity for reproducing such an outlook in their children.

It is also interesting to ask about "conversions" of members of the "nones minus atheists" group into other religious dispositions. Unfortunately, based on the Pew Research Center (2014) data, it is not possible to give a straight answer. It does offer the idea of religious switching for the whole of "nones," though: 20 percent into Protestant/Evangelical Churches, 4 percent into other religions, and 4 percent into the Catholic Church. In total, 28 percent shift from the "nones" into organized religion. If we keep in mind that atheists comprise 9 percent of "nones" (taking into account the average size of both groups between 1995 and 2017), even if no religious shifting among atheists is assumed (which is unlikely since, as we have seen, about one-quarter of them believe in God), it is possible to say that 26 percent of "nones minus atheists" do shift.

In summary, our category of "nones minus atheists," which includes agnostics, "functional agnostics," and persons with religious/spiritual drives who resist organized/traditional religion constitutes a group in flux, which has been able to attract 68 percent of its members from organized religion, and has lost in the more optimistic scenario about 26 percent of its members to organized religion, as per information from 2014.

As per the sociodemographic data of the "nones minus atheists" group, according to the Pew Research Center (2014), it is composed of 56 percent males and 44 percent females. They are young: 26 percent are 16–25, 38 percent are 26–40, 26 percent are 41–60, and 11 percent are 61 or older. They are

also mostly urban (78 percent). Information on social class and ethnicity would not be provided for Spanish-speaking Latin America as a whole, but by countries in idiosyncratic ways.

Significantly, 55 percent of them considered religion as important (29 percent very important; 26 percent somewhat important) in their lives, while 21 percent declared that they were actively looking for a religion. Thirty-four percent said they prayed one or more times a day, while 29 percent declared they never pray. Regarding participation in religious services, only 5 percent participate at least once per week, while 60 percent report no participation. Illustrating aspects of their rejection of organized religion, those who left Catholicism did so because they gradually drifted away (23 percent), disbelief in Catholic teaching (18 percent), being unhappy with Catholic moral teachings (16 percent), a personal or family problem (5 percent, mostly health and marital difficulties), or marrying someone who was not Catholic (2 percent).

Preliminary Observations

Comparing atheists and the other groups in the "none" category, it is possible to say a few things that have happened in the past thirty-five years with regards to our topic.

First, both groups have behaved differently in terms of their memberships. Atheists have remained a very small part of the population (1.6 percent at most), and agnostics have been even fewer (0.5 percent at most); those who are "believers but not belonging to a church" have declined after reaching a high of 3.6 percent, while those simply reporting no religious affiliation have grown steadily to 16.5 percent in 2017. It seems that the latter's looser identity lacks a need for strong intellectual arguments – such as those of atheism or agnosticism – and is seemingly less demanding and more hospitable for those who have no certainties about religious matters and do not feel an imperative to reach for them. A similar interpretation can be offered for those who describe themselves as "believers, but not belonging to a church," since simply describing their position as not having a religion leaves aside the need for explaining why the reference to a "church" might be needed (Bargsted et al. 2019). This could be one potential reason for the decline of this group in recent years.

Second, given the situation just described, those who identify as atheists should be willing to make an intellectual case for their position and one would expect they have developed one. This might be supported by the fact that they are overrepresented among those with partial or complete university education, who would had been steeped in a cultural framework infused

with western standards of rationality, as opposed to other frameworks such as syncretistic or indigenous systems of knowledge. This might explain why atheists are overrepresented among those who self-identify ethnically as white.

Third, both groups are distanced from organized religion in a significant way. It is plausible to affirm that, in the case of atheists, any shift in their position would be more likely a switch into another "none" group.

Fourth, the phenomenon of 26 percent of atheists believing in God should be explained in some way. The same should be said about the 23 percent who affirm religion as being very important or important in their lives. Both would find support for their positions in the 55 percent of the "nones minus atheists" group who share the same conviction. More research needs to be done about this matter.

Fifth, atheists in Spanish-speaking Latin America are also explained by the ability of unaffiliated families to socially reproduce their religious outlook in their children (Bargsted et al. 2019). This is even more pronounced among those who belong to the "nones minus atheists" group. Also, among the latter there is one-third of members who will switch to organized religion. One might ask if a similar phenomenon would occur with atheists, but no study was found to explore this matter further.

Lastly, besides sharing a rejection of organized religion, both atheists and the other "none" groups are overrepresented in their number of males, middle-class, educated, youth and young adults, and urban dwellers. Special consideration needs to be given to these variables for an explanation of the phenomenon.

Interpretation

The data just explored require a broader context for interpretation. To start with, we will examine the social imaginaries that existed in the region to better understand the development of atheism in Spanish-speaking Latin America during the twentieth century. Additionally, it is necessary to examine the ways in which these structures might have constrained or allowed these groups to affirm a disbelief in God and to live accordingly within this view.

It is possible to talk of three stages in the development of atheism during the twentieth century. Each stage entails the establishment and subsequent change of a given social imaginary. We name them arbitrarily, by referring to the ethical/political projects struggling for predominance. The first stage

began at the end of the nineteenth century and lasted until the 1960s. At the beginning of that period, the social imaginary was rooted in a liberal/conservative dualism within a traditional society. The second stage is that of the capitalist/socialist struggle in a reformist context that was established around the 1960s and developed until 1990. The third stage is one of a threefold struggle in the context of globalization which, it would be argued, crystallized in the early 1990s. This one witnesses the competing claims for development made by conservatives, liberals, and the confluence of old-guard Marxists, neo-Marxists, and postmodernists. In each of these stages, atheists (as well as the other "nones") were able to enjoy different kinds and amounts of socially valued goods (intellectual, institutional, material resources; social status) that enabled changes in social and cultural structures (legitimation and social reproduction of their own social location).

One stage passes to another after a gradual sequence of social and cultural changes establishing a new social imaginary. These changes occur due to the interplay between social groups, particularly between elites and masses. The later stages do not supersede the earlier ones, which may still be alive in the lives of groups/subcultures. The whole process is not necessarily cumulative nor has a predetermined end. Furthermore, it is shaped by the specific conditions within the relevant countries, which is particularly true of Uruguay and Cuba, which seem to offer the most divergent trajectories. Table 42.2, which only highlights social processes related to the development of atheist groups, summarizes the interpretation.

Table 42.2 Framework for an Interpretation

Social realm	Cultural realm
First Stage (1900–1960s): liberal/conservative dualism within a traditional society	
• Legal recognition of other religious organizations • Industrialization begins • Relative expansion of the middle class • Expansion of systems of public education, including higher education • Public square discussions become more publicly followed due to printed media	• Positivism (social Darwinism) as a project of social reformism. Critique of religion as an unsophisticated worldview • Revolutionary ideologies (particularly Marxism). Critique of religion as alienation.

Table 42.2 (cont.)

Social realm	Cultural realm
• Atheists: educated elites embracing positivism. Middle- and lower-class revolutionary social activists (anarchists, Marxist socialists, forms of fascism). Strong intellectual resources. Some institutional resources in academia. Costly position in terms of social status for non-elite members	
Second Stage (1960s–1990s): capitalist/socialist struggle in a reformist context	
• Post-Vatican II Catholicism approves of civil recognition of religious freedom. Disestablishment of religion • The Cuban Revolution, which succeeded in 1958, supports revolutionary activists through the region • Military dictatorships in most Latin American countries. Return to democratic regimes in the 1980s • Strong urbanization • Development of the mass media (radio, TV). Consumerism	• Cold War confrontations between the project of capitalism and liberal democracy, on the one hand, and Marxist–Leninist/Maoist socialism on the other • Impact of an "ethics of authenticity" via the mass media and advertisement. Challenge to a religious-based morality • Assimilation of part of folk arts into socialist-oriented projects
• Atheists: growth in number. Still remain a small minority. Come mostly from public universities and educated members of traditional elites. A Marxist critique of religion prevails, among others. Strong intellectual resources until crisis of Marxism. Strong institutional resources in academia, material resources. Relatively high status as social activists	
Third Stage (1990s to present): threefold struggle in the context of globalization	
• Neoliberal economic programs put in place early in the stage • Pendulum effect: thrust toward left-wing governments in the early 2000s, and back to right-wing ones in the 2010s • Broadening of the middle class • Development of digital media and globalization of communications via the dissemination of access to the Internet • Relative reaffirmation of nation states	• Impact of postmodernist thought via academia, multilateral organizations (UN system, etc.), bilateral relations, and the Internet • Globalization of information leads to a radical experience of pluralism. Liquid identities • Reaction from conservatives and liberals in idiosyncratic ways. Claims for national identities and national culture
• Atheists: relative decline in numbers. Come mostly from the middle and lower middle classes, with some or complete higher education. Young and urban. Postmodernist preference for weak truth claims makes the atheistic position harder to keep. Share their position of distance from organized religion with other "none" groups. Strong institutional and material resources in academia. Social status not particularly high. A significant number of them may switch into other "none" group or leave atheism altogether.	

First Stage

The social imaginary prevalent in Spanish-speaking Latin America at the beginning of the twentieth century is one in which existing tensions between conservatives and liberals from the previous century give rise to the legal disestablishment of Catholicism as the official religion in several countries. In the majority of nations, one finds the creation of a public system of education, the establishment of civil marriages, the legal recognition of divorce, and limitations on the rights of the clergy and religious orders. These changes would bring about the privatization of religion and the gradual genesis of a religious pluralism due to the legal recognition of other religious groups (Marzal 2002, 213–14). Regardless of these changes, the Baroque Catholicism of the past three centuries would still be hugely predominant in all its syncretic variations.

Along with the strengthening of an export–import model, there occurs a relative growth of the middle class in the cities, and the initial development of the worker's movement. A greater interest in public affairs develops, along with interest in new political ideologies and strong political parties (Skidmore and Smith 2005): on the one hand, the modernizing project of reformist liberal positivism; on the other, the revolutionary project of different kinds of socialism, of which the Marxist version prevailed. Universities were among the preferred fields for these projects to engage in discussion and get supporters.

After the Great Depression of 1929 and its negative impact in the region, a series of military governments took power in several countries. Charismatic leadership mixed with authoritarianism provided some political stability for the remainder of this period. At the same time, a push for industrialization began as a way of substituting imports. For some time before World War II, a few political movements inspired in fascism were born and soon disappeared. By the end of this period, in most countries there was a return to democracy, with a greater awareness of the need for guaranteeing rights to the masses and for greater social justice. This was apparent in the arts, particularly in literature, with Indianist novels and narratives of social critique (Martin 1998).

Throughout this stage, atheists experienced significant social change. They passed from being isolated as individual members of the educated elite, usually adherents to positivist philosophy, to members of small groups, usually within public institutions of higher education that were outside the control of the Catholic Church. They were united in a belief that religion would pass as a scientific worldview was installed in the minds of the people. Additionally, another form of atheist would emerge from the

lower and middle classes, who embraced revolutionary Marxism. They offered a more radical criticism of religion as a structure of control aimed at the perpetuation of class inequality and struggle. Both kinds of atheists yielded strong intellectual resources and some institutional ones. Initially, this position was costly in terms of social status, especially for those in the lower and middle classes. As time passed, a greater understanding of social justice and fair political participation would improve the social status of these individuals.

Second Stage

By the 1960s, a new social imaginary had crystallized. An appreciation for liberal democracy, egalitarianism, and a drive for social justice and development became shared by most Latin Americans. Vatican II's teaching on religious freedom further privatized religion and legitimated in the minds of many the growth of religious pluralism. In several countries the Catholic Church lost its official state designation. Protestant/Evangelical churches would use this new-found freedom to grow within the region and go from 4 to 15 percent of the total population (Perez 2017).

In Latin American history the interpenetration of the religious system with all other social structures has been a constant. This can be contrasted with the strong push for a separation of church and state found within North America and western Europe. In this stage, this dual approach became at the same time sacred and secular. Facts were sometimes interpreted as part of history and as tasks achieved only though human agency, God was seen as not present in ordinary life nor as near, and things were at the service of man, who should order them to his benefit. However, at other times facts were interpreted as part of a cosmos sustained and directed by God, present in day-to-day life and close by (Marzal 2002, 215–16).

Along with a strong social reformist persuasion among people, another important element of the social imaginary is the assimilation of an "ethics of authenticity," one in which morality is seen as a way of realizing our individual humanity, and which entails both a personal quest for doing so, and a rejection of models imposed on us from the outside, either by the previous generation or religious or political authorities (Taylor 2007, 475). This eroded the prevalence of Catholic morality in growing segments of society. The mass media (radio, TV) started to develop and allowed for the dissemination of these self-understandings, particularly coming from North America and western Europe, into large portions of the urban population. The middle class joined the elites in their openness to secular ideas and consumerism.

The substituting imports model stagnated and economic growth declined in the region. This increased social unrest (Skidmore and Smith 2005). The growth of cities via inter-country migration further created social tensions. Such situations were addressed in different ways by reformist and revolutionary political parties, which garnered popular support. The triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1958 gave radical Marxist–Leninist groups intellectual and material support for their activities from the Soviet Union. Other Maoist groups obtained support from the People's Republic of China. Left-wing revolutionaries gradually influenced a significant number of artists and impacted both folk and popular art (Behague 1998; Martin 1998). Within the Catholic Church, mainstream liberation theology created an elite that in many places also aligned itself with the political left (Schwaller 2011, 258). The fall of real socialism in 1989 was a big blow for all of these groups, both in terms of their intellectual reputation and their material resources.

As a response to the rise of left-wing terrorism and guerrilla attacks, there were military coups in most Latin American countries. These coups were externally supported by the United States, while they were internally driven by the upper and middle classes, as well as key parts of the Catholic Church hierarchy. One of the consequences of these developments was strong political repression in some countries, which was not necessarily endorsed by all those who feared a left-wing revolution. Regardless, in the 1980s, there was a generalized return to democratically elected regimes.

Groups of atheists in this stage were small and their members came from public universities or were educated members of traditional elites. Along with the predominant Marxist critique of religion, other options appeared: the dismissal of religion as something discredited by science and technology, humanist atheism (Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre), and Freudian atheism. A view of an ethics of authenticity prevailed among them and gave them strong intellectual resources. However, a secular/sacred approach to reality made it possible for some members to engage in eventual religious beliefs and practices. The group also enjoyed strong institutional resources in academia, material resources through the international support of left-wing political institutions, and a relatively high status as social activists. The Marxist critique of religion became somewhat discredited after the fall of the Soviet Bloc in 1989. However, the other elements remained.

Third Stage

Since the 1990s, the social imaginary of Spanish-speaking Latin American countries has taken a new shape, one in which globalization has been the

backdrop of the struggle between three ethical/political projects: conservatives, liberals, and the confluence of old-guard Marxists, neo-Marxists and postmodernists. All these positions have incorporated in one way or another a version of an ethics of authenticity, and the results of the conflicts between them is still not clear. In all of them, an appreciation for social justice and development of democracy is present, although interpreted differently.

The Latin American religious landscape underwent strong changes. Protestant/Evangelical Churches kept growing to the point that they include now almost half of the population of Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, reaching about 20 percent of the population of all Latin America (Perez 2017). The number of religious "nones" grew from 5 percent in 1996 to 16.5 percent in 2017 (Latinobarometro 2017). A new kind of Latin American believer, postmodern and eclectic, has appeared, for whom the religious quest is a way for escaping from a materialist outlook, a quest carried out individually, with the aim of satisfying their subjective needs for meaning. Religious institutions seem to them carriers of unacceptable demands: strongly affirmed truths, a morality of rules. As a consequence, whenever the "nones" form groups, their lives are loose and sometimes precarious. As relativists, they give equal consideration to all religious traditions, which they value for their efficacy for providing transcendent meaning to life. They might become "religious shoppers" (Marzal 2002, 220–1).

This last description shows how in this stage, western postmodernist thought impacted academia, artists, the media, public systems of education, and the lives of ordinary people particularly through the broad dissemination of Internet access in the region. The latter offers an immediate experience of strong pluralism that seems to legitimize postmodernist ideas and values. These are also promoted through multilateral organizations and bilateral foreign relations with western countries.

The implementation of liberal economic policies in the 1990s was a way of dealing with the astronomic public debt accumulated by Latin American countries since the 1970s (Skidmore and Smith 2005). Although not successful in all countries, they did increase the size of Latin American economies and broadened the middle class, which has embraced a logic of consumerism. Although in the 2000s there was a swing of the political pendulum toward democratically elected left-wing governments, free-market economic models and integration into the global market were not stopped. Ten years later, in the 2010s, the pendulum swung back to the political right.

In this context, atheists have declined in numbers, probably because people who distance themselves from religion also distance themselves from strongly affirming the non-existence of God. They come mostly from the middle and lower middle classes, with some or complete higher education. They are young city dwellers who feel free to live according to their personal views and to express these views publicly (Pew Research Center 2014). Some of them, as scholars, find institutional and material resources in their academic institutions. Their social status is not particularly high, on average. A significant number of them may switch into other "none" groups or leave atheism altogether.

Case Study: Peru

In what follows, the interpretation of the development of groups of atheists in Spanish-speaking Latin America since the beginning of the twentieth century to the present is tested, using Peru as a case study.

In the opening of the first stage described above, atheism in Peru in the early twentieth century had mainly a positivist outlook. Salazar Bondy (1965) places its maximum impact between 1885 and 1915. University students and scholars (even those who opposed it) were captivated because of its precision, scientific rigor, and anti-metaphysical stance. It found its home at the Faculty of Arts of St. Mark's University (*Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos*), in Lima, the most important public university of the time. However, this group also thought two kinds of morality were needed: one for the elites, based on western philosophical ideas (Kant, Comte, Spencer, Nietzsche), and another for the masses, based on ancient myths carried on in traditions and institutions (Baroque Catholicism). Furthermore, a minority of these thinkers would become influenced by Bergson's ideas, which would create a non-materialistic positivist attitude. This would explain why, at the time, atheistic scholars kept attending Catholic liturgies and sending their children to Catholic schools (Salazar Bondy 1965).

Some of the more important representatives of atheist materialistic positivism are thinker Manuel Gonzalez Prada (1848–1918) and philosopher Javier Prado (1871–1921), while sociologists Mariano Cornejo (1866–1942) and Manuel Vicente Villaran (1873–1958) are ambiguous about their rejection of God. On the side of the "Bergsonian" positivism, the more important names were philosophers Alejandro O. Deustua (1849–1945), Francisco Garcia Calderon (1883–1953), Mariano Iberico (1893–1974), and psychiatrist Honorio Delgado (1892–1969). Members of this second group would not qualify as atheists, though, but created

an environment in which God's existence may be called into question and religion could be seen as a merely human phenomenon.

The other significant trend of Peruvian atheism is that of social activists inspired by Marx's thought. In contrast with the ones previously mentioned, who were part of or supported the liberal Civilist Party, this group can be located on the left of the political spectrum. One of the more important members was Jose Carlos Mariategui (1895–1930), who founded the Peruvian Socialist Party in 1928. Other representatives would come from the followers of Victor Raul Haya de la Torre (1895–1979), founder of the APRA (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance), who reinterprets Marxism with his historical space–time theory. Some APRA members were atheists in a Marxist vein, while all of them supported a strong legal divide between state and religion. In connection with these left-wing intellectuals, politicians, and activists one finds Indianist novelists such as Ciro Alegria (1909–66), who seems to consider religion as a self-consoling illusion, and Jose Maria Arguedas (1911–69), who strongly criticizes religion as legitimating the unjust use of power, but seems to be undecided regarding his atheism. Both of them developed a strong anti-Catholic rhetoric. To these one must add the poet Cesar Vallejo (1893–1936), who was a militant Marxist–Leninist and argues as a convinced atheist.

At the beginning of the second stage, in the 1960s, atheist groups in Peru were minimal, composed by members of educated elites, some of them coming from traditional upper-class families and others from politically revolutionary persons from the lower and middle classes. They flourished in academia and public universities, and around Marxist political parties. During the following thirty years they would increase their influence, although they would remain a small minority, particularly among the educated elites.

Among atheist scholars at this stage one should mention Francisco Miro Quesada (1918–2019), an anti-Marxist who espoused a "nostalgic atheism," and Augusto Salazar Bondy (1925–74). However, of greater impact were literary writers who embodied a strong anti-religious critique that complemented their social reformist/revolutionary claims. A good example of this would be Oswaldo Reynoso (1931–2016), who saw religion as thoroughly hypocritical, deceitful, and as legitimating all kind of evils in Peruvian society, and called for the "organized action of a party of peasants, workers and committed people." Coming from a different perspective, a novelist who deserves to be mentioned is Mario Vargas Llosa (b. 1936), for whom religion, at this time, besides being part of Peruvian traditional institutions, is irrelevant for the inner lives of people, something one can leave to the side without real consequence. Although an agnostic himself, his

personal prestige gives a strong backing to a liberal religious critique also used by atheists.

The military revolutionary regime that seized and held power from 1968 to 1980, in its first seven years strongly relied on left-wing activists, intellectuals, and artists. This added institutional and material resources to those already enjoyed by atheist groups of this political persuasion.

The only quantitative study on Peruvian atheism for this period is that of Francisco Interdonato (1968), who surveys students in the major universities in Lima and asks about the more influential authors in provoking an atheist/agnostic position, and for their underlying motivations. Only 11 percent of respondents said that the thinkers already mentioned in this analysis played an important role in promoting atheism/agnosticism in their generation, citing Gonzalez Prada and Mariategui. However, 54 percent of the same respondents said that the works by the literary authors may have influenced the atheist/agnostic positions of their peers, and 10 percent said the same of many. For the reasons for calling into question believing in God, the following are mentioned: technological development has made belief in God outdated (scientific atheism, 42 percent), belief in God is incompatible with human dignity and freedom (atheistic humanism, 16 percent said yes; 38 percent would consider this option); Marxism is a good explanation of reality (21 percent said yes; 37 percent would consider this option); belief in God is an instrument of oppression on the part of the powerful (8 percent); religion originated in primitive fears that created complexes (as in Freud, 18 percent). Reynaldo Alarcon (1978) conducts a quantitative study among university students in Peru that shows how their time at the university creates negative changes in attitude toward religion.

The third stage, as defined above and starting in the 1990s, finds atheists as a small minority coming mostly from educated elites. They espouse different critiques of religion, the more important ones being scientism and Marxism. Their influence is important in academia, left-wing political parties, and in some governmental agencies. After the fall of real socialism and the whole Soviet Bloc in 1989, the intellectual resources of Marxist atheists were strongly impacted until they were able to redefine themselves along the lines of neo-Marxism and postmodernist thought. Another important cause for the weakening of the specific Marxist critique of religion are the actions of the Shining Path, the radical left-wing terrorist group that was defeated in the early 2000s, which at that time undermined much of the legitimacy the political left had gained in the country.

Quantitative studies of this period show a relative decline in the atheist population. Latinobarometro (2017) indicates that between 2000 and 2005, atheists represented 1 percent of Peru's population, whereas the figures from 2006–16 consistently place them below that figure. According to this source, Peruvian atheists were predominantly male (100 percent), which contrasts with the 52 percent of males reported by the Pew Research Center (2014). They are also middle class (54 percent) and lower middle class (36 percent) individuals, with incomplete and complete post-secondary education (64 percent). It is mainly a young adult group: 27 percent are 16–25, 46 percent are 26–40, 18 percent are 41–60, and 9 percent are 61 or older. Finally, the ethnic makeup is mostly *mestizo* (64 percent). Additionally, the Pew Research Center (2014) shows that 81 percent of atheists are from the urban population.

When compared with the whole population, members of this group are twice as likely to be male, although, if one takes the results provided by the Pew Research Center (2014), they are 1.2 times more likely to be so. Also, they are 1.3 times more likely to be middle class and 1.8 times more likely to be lower middle class; 1.9 times more likely to have incomplete and complete post-secondary education. Additionally, with regards to age, they are 1.1 times more likely to be 16–25, 1.3 times more likely to be 26–40, 0.7 times more likely to be 41–60, and 0.7 times more likely to be 61 or older. Furthermore, ethnically they are 0.9 times more likely to be *mestizo*. Lastly, as per the Pew Research Center (2014), they are all urban dwellers.

The impact of globalization in the country caused the fragilization of social identities and the further pluralization of the religious landscape. This has had significant consequences for a large part of the Peruvian population, who now have access to the Internet and have become middle class. Furthermore, the popularization of postmodernist thought has given rise to a new kind of believer, eclectic and in spiritual quest, for whom the criteria for putting together a spiritual system is wholly personal and pursues the satisfaction of immediate needs for meaning. Artists have collaborated in the popularization of these views. For example, Vargas Llosa's work at this time, which had a focus on religion, contributed to disseminating a view of reality as fragmented and religion as a fluid and subjective category, in line with postmodernist thought (Gonzalez 2012).

Within the context just described, atheism becomes a very demanding option for those who embrace it. Qualitative studies on atheists in Lima, coming from different social classes and with diverse educational attainment, show that such a decision is quite rational, one that does not accept religious narratives nor the existence of a transcendent world different than this one (Romero and Lecaros

2017). In the specific case of highly educated individual atheists, most of them substantiated their positions along the lines of secular humanism and New Atheism. Among the influences on their decisions to be atheists, they say that it is the most reasonable position because of what science tells us about the world, and due to the critique they made of sacred texts (the Bible) as absurd and immoral. Also, they mention as a reason the inconsistencies in the lives of those who affirm to be religious persons. They promote atheism through organizations and Internet outlets (Fernandez and Castillo 2017).

Individuals and small groups of philosophers have been working, independently from institutions of higher education, on atheistic projects with their own webpages. Among them are Manuel Paz y Mino, the Peruvian Association of Atheists, Philosophical Exchange, and Practical Philosophy Project. These initiatives are grounded in secular humanist thought. Some important public figures in the media and academia disseminate a strong anti-religious critique, not always atheistic, but one that undermines theistic claims. Among them, one may mention the journalists Cesar Hildebrandt, Jaime Bayly, and Aldo Mariategui.

At the present time, Peruvian atheists are a smaller share of the population than they were thirty years ago. They come from an educated milieu and can come from the middle and lower middle classes. They are young and their distribution seems not to be related to ethnicity nor urbanity. Some of them are scholars but many of them are not. They find institutional and material resources in their academic institutions or in organizations they create. Their social status is not particularly high. There seems to be still more research to be done to explore other motivations of Peruvian atheists, including positions that may not necessarily entail a strong critique of religion or that might even play a positive social role.

Conclusion

Atheists in Spanish-speaking Latin America have been a minority from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. They have relatively diminished in number since the 1990s, at the same time that other religious "nones" have increased. However, throughout that time they have been very influential in academia, politics, and culture in general, much more so than their numbers would suggest. Their motivations have passed from strong positivist and Marxist critiques of religion to secular humanist and postmodernist versions of it. However, they do not always seem to hold anti-religious views.

Throughout this time, they have consistently been groups where males and well-educated persons have been overrepresented. Young and young adult persons have also been overrepresented among them for the last thirty-five years at least. While in the past they were white urban dwellers coming from the upper and middle classes, today these characteristics may vary by country. Currently, they comprise a group with a porous identity, with about one-quarter who believe in God and find that to be important, which makes it likely that these subgroups may shift into another "none" subgroup or back into organized religion. Furthermore, about one-third of them have been socialized as "nones."

Historically, social factors such as the secularization of the state, religious pluralism, religious privatization, urbanization, the expansion of the middle class, and the establishment of systems of public education (particularly colleges and universities) have helped atheism to grow. The impact of the mass media and digital media, and the support from religious authorities of military de facto regimes, seem to have also helped the dissemination of atheism. However, political developments such as the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989 or the impact of radical left-wing terrorist and guerrilla groups have also discredited the Marxist critique of religion and called into question atheist arguments. Also, atheists seem to have problems with membership retention.

Cultural factors such as the spread of different critiques of religion by academics, politicians, and novelists seemed to have helped the growth of atheist groups. In contrast, other cultural causes have limited such growth, among them the persistent interpenetration of the religious system in other social structures, and the impact of postmodernist thought, which has nurtured a fragmented and eclectic self-understanding in people, which makes it more difficult for them to embrace an atheist position with the strong arguments it entails.

Atheist groups have retained, and enhanced, their access to institutional and material resources, as well as to the media. Although they were able to reach a high social status between 1960 and 1990, at the present time being atheist would not necessarily imply this.

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The Road to Modern China

LAN LI

The term *atheism* infers one of three basic definitions. Someone who considers him or herself an atheist may simply lack a belief in the existence of supernatural, divine forces. Some, more narrowly, may outright reject such a belief, and still others, in the strictest sense, take the position that there really is no debate to be had.

At a glance, directly associating Chinese tradition with even the more open-ended definition of atheism (a mere lack of belief) would seem rather forced. While it is true that certain religious beliefs were suppressed by those higher up the ladder throughout Chinese history and that some of China's brightest and most intellectual voiced vehement suspicion, disregard, and even stark criticism, these actions still fell very far short of what it means to be atheist. The same could also be said for commoners, who took a more pragmatic (as opposed to a theist/atheist) approach when it came to religious observance and practice.

Caesaropapism dominated Chinese religious and political doctrine throughout its Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, during the last of which the most primitive forms of spirit worship and witchcraft flourished and transformed into an ancestral temple system based in outlying areas of cities. The system was comprised of sacrifices made to heaven, earth, ancestors, the state, and, of course, deities. By the time the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period made their appearances, it was written of how society, as morally degenerate as it was already seen to be, was ever worsening. The Hundred Schools of Thought and their philosophies sprouted up and developed what they thought useful and discarded what they thought useless when they came to viewing religion. The philosophy of political ethics represented by Confucianism 'did not talk on extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings' (Confucius and Mencius 1930, 87). Rather, they held this ancestral temple system in high regard, thereby fermenting the foundation of traditional Chinese ideologies and beliefs.

Across the more than two millennia of Imperial China's history (from the Qin to the Qing dynasties), there was never a period in which theocracy took precedence over an emperor's rule, and China never adopted a national religion complete with its own theology. There was, however, a nationally respected ideological system (that was Confucian in nature), which took on the politically utilitarian recognition of supernatural entities (in the form of gods and disembodied spirits). This led to the legitimization of nationally practised sacrificial rites (for honouring heaven, earth, ancestors, etc.) but the rejection of anything having to do with divination, sorcery, and foreign belief systems. This shows that the suppression of any religion by the imperial rulers was not implemented in the sense of atheism. Likewise, the doubts and criticisms of any religion by ancient Chinese thinkers did not have an atheistic premise. The doubts and criticisms expressed by the most orthodox of ancient thinkers were never meant to be taken as proclamations of atheistic standpoints. They did, however, point at how the existence of certain supernatural entities seemed less than feasible, with their supposed presence thereby violating the rules of nature as regarded under rational thought and analysis, and their statements served as a direct disapproval of blind faith. However, when it came to other deities – such as those of nature, ancestors, and local protectors – their existence never seemed to be brought into question, and the derived sacrificial rites system that was being practised throughout the empire maintained its prestige. Therefore, no matter how sharp and intense their criticism of theism or how sufficiently they explained it away, nothing they believed could ever amount to what is defined as true atheism.

Moreover, the absence of an ontological perspective in the ancient Chinese theological system is what led to such a realism-based religious outlook, which profoundly impacted the shape of traditional Chinese beliefs. China had various schools of thought (though none more influential than the Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist trio)[1] that expressed their own distinct ways of viewing the world, as well as supreme, otherworldly forces, but it is notable that throughout them all,

1 "The three religions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are general terms, with each -ism (implying discipline) having its own religion and philosophy. The one known as Confucianism bears a set of traditional religious principles that respect Heaven and one's ancestors, with learning based on its philosophy. Traditional patriarchal religions preferred discipline over study, but not so with Confucian philosophy. The one known as Buddhism has both discipline and philosophy. The religion consists of chanting sutras and worship, and the philosophy is that of Zen (the Chinese pronunciation is Chán). The former is suitable for the ordinary faithful, and the latter is suitable for eminent monks. The one known as Taoism incorporates both a religion and a school. The religion is made up of incantations, alchemy, and the pursuit of eternal life. The school, however, concerns the philosophy of advocating nature and pursuing spiritual liberation." See Mou and Zhang (2000, 1211–12).

there is neither any discussion on how to classify the godly realm through the lens of ontology nor a clear definition of what separates the natural from the supernatural. There is inference of a certain cherry-picking behaviour that took place when deciding which gods were and were not part of a pantheon, and from this came an apparent contradiction in the dualism between theism and atheism. In Chinese culture, therefore, the lines separating deities and their roles blurred, and gods would share many traits, leading to an expanding hodgepodge of concepts, ideas, and beliefs within a single theological system. This also meant that one's view on whether various deities existed was often random, capricious, and conditional, without much, if any, forethought in terms of theology. People thus made their choices regarding such matters to fulfil a worldly, utilitarian purpose. Two common Chinese proverbs roughly translated as 'No one goes to the temple for nothing'[2] and 'Embrace Buddha's feet in one's hour of need'[3] display such attitudes, as well as a perceptible layer of scepticism. Regardless of one's belief, faith became equivocal, and devotion was minimal.

Henceforth, for the purpose of avoiding unnecessary ambiguity, the definition of atheism as a firm disbelief will be abandoned as part of this discussion on traditional Chinese ways of thinking. This is not to say that a secularist perspective and rational mind-set did not exist among the intellectuals of old. It is quite clear that these determined the attitudes of the imperial ruling class and ordinary people towards religion, as well as influenced how the Chinese later accepted the theory of evolution and Marxist atheism as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) promoted an atheistic stance towards education and national policy. They also did their part in clearing up, at least to a certain extent, the ideological barriers holding the people back from self-identifying as atheists. Thus, this chapter will start with a look at the social and historical origins, the formative processes, and the characteristics of traditional Chinese beliefs and how they, in the modern age, have laid the groundwork for atheism to make such a profound impact on the national ideology, convictions, and boldening of religious criticism as found within the People's Republic of China today.

The Impact of Confucianism on Traditional Chinese Beliefs

Confucian scholars originally served as experts who would preside over ceremonial duties. The term *propriety*[4] (as coined by James Legge) refers to

2 Original Chinese: 無事不登三寶殿. 3 Original Chinese: 臨時抱佛腳.
4 Original Chinese: 禮; more accurately translated as 'rites'.

the performance of sacrificial offerings, which in Confucian thought served '[t]o subdue one's self and return to propriety' (Confucius and Mencius 1930, 155). There is sharp conflict, however, between the social ideal propagated in Confucian secularism and the rites of Zhou it aimed to revive, so it was difficult for Confucius to answer questions posed by his students concerning life and death or spirits and deities. Denial meant the absence of an object to which one could sacrifice, and acceptance would be inconsistent with his secularist views on the social ideal. His responses were thus ambiguous, equivocal, and even specious. For example, he answered the question posted by one of his students, Ji Lu, as follows: 'While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve *their* spirits? . . . While you do not know life, how can you know about death?' (Confucius and Mencius 1930, 142).

As his political and social ideal was to become integrated with society and help rulers restore political order and maintain social moral codes, all was bent towards the living on earth instead of what could transpire after one's life, and concerned society and human beings rather than the existence of the supernatural. Considering this, however, the political order, as well as morality and ethics, he wished to rebuild still found a place in *propriety*, with sacrificial offerings very much conducive to the idea. Confucius therefore emphasized people, food, funerals, and sacrifices by respecting sacrificial ceremonies made towards deities, the state, and one's ancestors. To quell the sense of contradiction, he adopted such actions as 'respecting spiritual beings, to keep aloof from them' (Confucius and Mencius 1930, 73) and 'sacrificing to the spirits, as if the spirits were present' (Confucius and Mencius 1930, 30) instead of directly discussing the fundamental question of whether deities existed and thereby subletting primitive religious rituals for the purpose of political utilitarianism. Thus, the attitude of Confucianism towards religion is *shendao shejiao*, literally translated as 'to use the gods as a means to educate'.[5]

As a national ideology established by the imperial rulers, Confucianism's attitude towards religion had a profound impact on traditional beliefs in China. As Mou and Zhang noted in their book on China's religious history:

> In the age of Imperial China, the spontaneous worship of deities and the royal family and the close integration of worship of the state and imperial power brought about a state religion characterized by a patriarchal clan

5 Original Chinese: 神道設教; pulled from the *Book of the Later Han*, in which it is described how leaders would bend the worship of gods to do their bidding: 足下欲成天順民，輔漢而起，其實無所受命，將何以見信於眾乎？宜急立高廟，稱臣奉祠，所謂神道設教，求助人神者也。- Fan Ye, 'Kui Xiao Zhuan' (隗囂傳) in *Book of the Later Han* (Hou Han Shu, 後漢書).

> system. At that time, sacrifices made to ancestors in outlying areas played an important role for China's ceremonial system. Respecting Heaven and one's ancestors were popular among all Chinese and became something in which everyone took unquestionable part, giving rise to what could be recognized as a national religion. This idea to unify sacrifices and politics displays a robust political character, and the unification of sacrifices and one's family-clan features a character of universality among its people. The political power of the state, as the upper class, depended on the theocracy derived from the region. Within the concept of the divine right of kings, deities were Heaven's emperors (*haotian shangdi*) or supreme rulers (*huangtian shangdi*). The middle and lower classes preferred grand ceremonies when conducting such sacrifices to their ancestor gods.[6] (Mou and Zhang 2000, 1214)

It is thus rather obvious that such a political and social atmosphere made it difficult for the doubt of, opposition to, or categorical denial of the existence of deities typical of contemporary atheism to arise and take shape in a way that would be recognized today.

However, the other side of the traditional Chinese belief system was the idea of secularism as proposed by Confucianism (i.e. to challenge and criticize religion). Confucianism denied anything that did not contribute to the strengthening of political indoctrination, such as primitive witchcraft and divinatory rituals. As a result, since the national ideology shifted to the dismissal of the Hundred Schools in favour of Confucian ethics during China's imperial times, witchcraft, divination, and other primitive practices gradually exited the stage of nationally recognized religious ceremonies and existed in pockets among the people. This also meant that the national ideology emphasizing orthodox Confucian views led to the rejection and even hatred of all other ideologies and religions (including foreign religions) as acts of contravention against China's political indoctrination, with those who partook labelled heretics. This can be seen in the highly Confucian-leaning trends of Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity in China, a mark of just how aggressive and impactful the repressive and critical campaign has been. The imperial rulers since the Qin and Han dynasties[7] selected religious affiliations under the pretence of their utilitarian value, while China's

6 Original Chinese: 原生型的天神崇拜、皇族崇拜、社稷崇拜與皇權緊密結合，形成宗法性國家宗教。其郊社宗廟制度是國家禮制的重要內容。其尊天敬祖的信仰是中國全社會的普遍的基礎性信仰，具有不可動搖的神聖地位，所以它又是民族宗教。這種宗教既表現出強烈的政治性，所謂祭政合一；又表現出廣泛的全民性，所謂祭族合一。在上層，國家政權所依賴的神權就是來於這種宗教，"君權天授"的天神，就是原生型宗教裡的"昊天上帝"或"皇天上帝"。在中層和下層，普遍而隆重的宗教活動便是祭拜祖先神靈。.

7 Qin (221–206 BC) is China's first imperial dynasty.

intellectuals continued to doubt, criticize, and despise arguments for the existence of some of the deities in order to maintain the orthodox ideology of Confucianism and political rule of the empire. To exemplify this thought, for example, in his theory regarding heaven and humanity, Xunzi held doubts concerning the concept of heaven as a personal presence as well as the idea that one's fortune had an inherent link to such a personal, godly force. He wrote at the beginning of his eponymous work's 'Discourse on Heaven':

> Heaven is under its own precepts, and neither the splendour of Emperor Yao nor the brutality of King Jie can alter its course. Fortune settles on those who govern in accordance with Heaven's precepts; affliction falls on those who choose another path. Should someone promote strict economic practices as well as strengthen agriculture, Heaven itself could never cause that person to sink into poverty. Those who prepare things well in advance and keep their bodies active ensure Heaven will never strike them with any sort of illness. Being ethical and morally sound keep Heaven's fierce judgement at bay. Hunger from floods and droughts, sickness from extreme heat or cold, and suffering from earthly calamities would all be no more. Should one leave the fields for selfish indulgence, Heaven could never bring wealth and abundance. Those barely meeting their basic needs and not willing to engage in some sort of physical activity ensure Heaven will not grant them health. Going against this grind and opting for treachery mean Heaven's auspices will never shed their light. Thus shall come famine before any floods and droughts, disease before any extreme heat or cold, and affliction before any earthly calamities. The time they get is the same as that of a peaceful period, but the impact incurred is very much different. Heaven is not to blame. This is just how things happen. The one who clearly distinguishes which humanly actions are and are not in line with Heaven's precepts is worthy of a lofty pedestal.[8]

Wang Chong proposed in his *Critical Essays* that everything is generated by the natural movement of qi (also spelled ch'i) and has nothing to do with a personal force: 'The qi between Heaven and Earth intersects, and everything in the universe naturally transpires.'[9] As a result, he took a firm stance against the idea that humankind shared a direct interactional relationship with

8 Original Chinese: 天行有常，不為堯存，不為桀亡。應之以治則吉，應之以亂則凶。彊本而節用，則天不能貧；養備而動時，則天不能病；脩道而不貳，則天不能禍。故水旱不能使之飢，寒暑不能使之疾，祆怪不能使之凶。本荒而用侈，則天不能使之富；養略而動罕，則天不能使之全；倍道而妄行，則天不能使之吉。故水旱未至而飢，寒暑未薄而疾，祆怪未至而凶。受時與治世同，而殃禍與治世異，不可以怨天，其道然也。故明於天人之分，則可謂至人矣。(Xunzi, 'Discourse on Heaven' (Tian Lun, 天論) in *Xunzi*).

9 Original Chinese: 天地合氣，萬物自生 – Wang Chong. 'Zi Ran' (自然) in *Discourses Weighed in the Balance* (*Lun Heng*, 論衡).

heaven and the thought that issues within society, politics, and human affairs were in any way connected to the occurrence of natural disasters. 'Heaven cannot be emotionally affected by people's actions or respond to people with its own actions', he suggested.[10] Wang also did not believe in the existence of ghosts. 'When someone dies, that person's blood dries, and the spiritual essence is no longer. The body decays and returns to the dust. From what, then, can a ghost manifest itself?'[11] Liu Zongyuan, on the other hand, conceptualized the *primordial* qi, putting in doubt the idea that a supernatural, personal deity could reside in an unseen world. He wrote at the beginning of *Answers to Questions on Heaven*, 'It is impossible to know who created the universe, the origin of which was utter chaos! Only qi, the most basic of all elements, existed in such a time!'[12]

According to his theory, everything is generated and developed from chaos through the movement of vitality. Thus, he did not view life as determined by fortune, destiny, or other related supernatural occurrences. Heaven was deemed unable to control such outcomes. This also served as a direct rebuttal to the concept of the Mandate of Heaven and the related theory regarding prophetic influence on the people by pushing for human beings themselves to take the place of godly forces. Then there was Ouyang Xiu, who advocated the separation of heaven and humanity. From his point of view, the idea of attributing personal situations, especially disasters, to celestial phenomena was something to be abandoned. When he edited the *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, he replaced the chapter of the 'Five Elements'[13] (which had been adopted by various historical records since the Han dynasty) with his 'Treatise on astronomy', dedicated purely to the recording of celestial events without a single mention of simultaneous happenings on earth. When he compiled biographical sketches of emperors for his *New Book of Tang*, he only wrote of solar eclipses, earthquakes, floods, and droughts in addition to human activities and omitted any links to worldly events. Although the *New Book of Tang* speaks of the Five Elements, never is a natural catastrophe linked with a human event (Chen 1992, 21–2).

10 Original Chinese: 人不能以行感天，天亦不能隨行而應人 – Wang Chong, 'Ming Yü' (明雩) in *Discourses Weighed in the Balance* (*Lun Heng*, 論衡).

11 Original Chinese: 人死血脈竭，竭而精氣滅，滅而形體朽，朽而成灰土，何用為鬼？ – Wang Chong, 'Lun Si' (論死) in *Discourses Weighed in the Balance* (*Lun Heng*, 論衡).

12 Original Chinese: 本始之茫，誕者傳焉。鴻靈幽紛，曷可言焉！曾黑晰眇，往來屯屯，龐昧革化，惟元氣存，而何為焉！ – Liu Zongyuan, 'Answers to Questions on Heaven' (Tian Dui, 天對).

13 A system in which events are classified by a defined interconnectivity between wood, earth, water, fire, and metal.

However, these thinkers cannot be regarded as atheists; neither can their views and opinions discussed above be referred to as atheistic. Their doubts and critiques of the influence of spirits and deities are a far cry from denying and challenging the existence of any supernatural entities. Xunzi held doubts concerning the concept of heaven as a personal presence as well as the idea that one's fortune had an inherent link to such a personal, godly force. Nevertheless, it was he who first advocated to treat 'Heaven, Earth, emperors, parents, and teachers'[14] as deities able to receive sacrificial offerings (Xu 2006, 101): 'The essence of propriety consists of three fundamental elements: the worship of Heaven and Earth, respect for one's ancestors, and the obeying of orders issued by monarchs and teachers.'[15] Xunzi also clearly defined the point of sacrificial offerings: 'People communicate with the deities to whom they sacrifice.'[16] Wang Chong, who denied the relationship between heaven and personal gods as well as the existence of disembodied spirits, actually believed that deities (especially God) existed. He shared the same view with the well-known Confucian Dong Zhongshu regarding God (or heaven) as the ruler of all things divine. Thus, the theory proposed by Wang Chong was oriented more to the inexistence of ghosts than radical atheism. Liu Zongyuan, who insisted that life could not be under heaven's precepts and rejected the idea that there existed supernatural beings beyond the primordial qi, was a lifelong Buddhist. He wrote: 'The principle of Buddhism is wide and inclusive. Anyone whose ambition is independent of material and feels shame about how things are being run in the real world will therefore become a Buddhist.'[17] In addition, his endorsement of Buddhism as a Confucian mainly manifested by integrating his understanding of Buddhist principles into the Confucian ideological system (Gu 1994). As for Ouyang Xiu, although he proposed the theory of distinguishing humankind from heaven and opposed pairing life on earth with celestial phenomena, his purpose for writing the *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties* was in light of his recognition that the concept of propriety was disintegrating, the principle of feudal moral conduct had all but vanished, and the systems and doctrines established by former emperors were nowhere to be found. His orthodox

14 Original Chinese: 天地君親師.
15 Original Chinese: 故禮，上事天，下事地，尊先祖而隆君師，是禮之三本也。.
16 Original Chinese: 敬接其神 (see Li 2018, 53).
17 Original Chinese: 佛之道，大而多容，凡有志於物外而恥制於世者，則思入焉。– Liu Zongyuan, 'Song Xuanju Gui Youquansi Xu' (送玄舉歸幽泉寺序, Preface to Sending Xuanju to Youquan Temple).

Confucian beliefs urged him to maintain the national sacrificial rites that Confucianism held so dear.

For the same political purpose, some ancient thinkers also tried to impede the propagation and development of foreign religions in China by means of criticizing the existence of deities. The introduction of Buddhism from India, for example, led to a centuries-long period of Sinicization, during which time the religion was continuously resisted and opposed by the orthodox Confucian ideas of scholarly officials. Fan Zhen, who wrote *On the Annihilation of the Soul* to reject the ideas of reincarnation proposed in Buddhism, was vaulted to fame by his sharp comments and meticulously logical arguments. When discussing the relationship between the soul and body, he wrote, 'The soul to the substance is like sharpness to a blade; the body to the effect is like a blade to its sharpness. The blade and its sharpness do not share the same name. However, there is no blade without its sharpness, and no sharpness without the blade. As there is no sharpness without a knife, it is impossible for a soul to exist without its body.'[18]

Recorded by the bibliographer Seng You in *Hongming Ji*, He Chengtian also pointed out, 'As we are born and as we die, like the seasons come and go, so our souls fade from existence. How, then, can any entities affect them?'[19] His words were an outright rejection of the Buddhist views of immortality and the regeneration of the soul. To reject the ideas of reincarnation he further explained: 'The ancients would witness the interaction between firewood and flame and compare it with the relationship between the body and soul. Firewood of poor quality cannot be set alight. When the firewood burns out, the flame is extinguished. What independent existence is there without regard to such an inherent law?'[20]

Qian Daxin criticized the Buddhist doctrine of deities' immortalization based on the relationship between flowers and their fragrance:

> Life and death are as common to human beings as the blossoming of flowers and trees in spring and their fall in autumn. Humans are products of body and soul, like how flowers combine colour with fragrance. When a flower

18 Original Chinese: 神之於質，猶利之於刃，形之於用，猶刃之於利，利之名非刃也，刃之名非利也。然而捨利無刃，舍刃無利，未聞刃没而利存，豈容形亡而神在？– Fan Zhen, 'On the Annihilation of the Soul' (Shen Mie Lun, 神滅論)

19 Original Chinese: 生必有死，形斃神散，猶春榮秋落，四時代換，奚有更受形哉！– He Chengtian, 'Da Xing Lun' (達性論), in Seng You (ed.) *Hong Ming Ji* (弘明集) volume 4, quoted by Chen (1992, 18).

20 Original Chinese: 形神相資，古人譬以薪火。薪弊火微，薪盡火滅，雖有其妙，豈能獨傳？– He Chengtian, 'Answer to Letter to Recluse Zong' (Da Zong Jushi Shu, 答宗居士書) in Seng You (ed.) *Hong Ming Ji* (弘明集) volume 3.

> falls, no one can smell it; how, then, can the soul be retained when the body is lost?'[21]

Another thinker, Huang Zongxi, wrote a response based on Fan Zhen's critique in a section of his *Arguments to Defeat Evil*: 'If one were to compare people to candles, the wick would be the body; the flame would be the spirit; and the light would be the soul.'[22] In his view, the body was formed by qi, and as people were thought to have both soul and spirit, the spirit could also be deemed as having been generated from qi. Therefore, both the body and spirit belonged to physical qi, while the existence of the soul and deities depended upon them. Based on this, he denied the existence of disembodied spirits and the idea that they had the power to bestow fortune or misfortune upon the living (Chen 1992, 23).

They analysed the relationship between the body and soul from an objective standpoint of admitting material existence in a way that denies the existence of the soul independent of the body and the disembodied spiritual beings resulting therefrom, making their opinions a form of rational thinking that puts the existence of deities in a sceptical light. However, this is once again only about how they see what they deem dissident religious beliefs that fly in the face of Confucian orthodoxy and, thereby, the national ideology, meaning that these opinions do not support, in their strictest theological sense, truly atheistic tendencies. These thinkers neither denied the existence of supernatural entities recognized by the state's sacrificial system, nor opposed related religious ceremonies. Qian Daxin, as an example, had an understanding of ghosts and deities that was grounded in Confucian thought, saying 'People exist as ghosts after they die; sages, in an effort to preserve their memories of their lost relatives, treat them as if they are still among the living, which leads to the propriety behind sacrifice. Thus, it is only in such sacrificial rituals ghosts and deities are given an active role to play.'[23] This puts these thinkers in a seemingly contradictory realm between the supposed dualism of atheism and theism. They were not true atheists,

21 Original Chinese: 生死者，人之常，草木之春榮秋落也。形神合而有身，若色香合而為花，未聞花落而香留，安得身亡而神在？– Qian Daxin, 'Shu Yao Zheng Qing Xiang' (鼠妖證青祥) in *A Discussion on Seventeen Histories* (*Shi Qi Shi Shang Que*, 十七史商榷), volume 13.

22 Original Chinese: 譬之於燭，其住是形，其焰是魄，其光明是魂。– Huang Zongxi, 'Hun Po' (魂魄) in *Arguments to Defeat Evil* (*Po Xie* Lun, 破邪論).

23 Original Chinese: 人死為鬼，聖人不忍忘其親，事死如事生，故有祭祀之禮。經言鬼神，皆主祭祀而言。– Qian Daxin, *A Record of Yangxin Studies in Shijia House* (*Shijiazhai Yangxin Lu*, 十駕齋養新錄).

and it can easily be argued that they would even oppose the notion of atheism in at least some of its aspects.

Such ideological contradictions among orthodox thinkers have thus made it impossible for traditional Chinese beliefs to fall neatly into the ideological box known as atheism. Moreover, as will be discussed in the next section, in addition to the influence of Confucianism, the lack of theological ontology within the ancient Chinese theology contributed to the creation of a grey area between theism and atheism in the traditional Chinese belief system. In the system, people of all ranks, from rulers to civilians, made their judgements and choices among various spirits and deities according to their own needs, resulting in an overtly utilitarian attitude towards faith. Whether one believes in gods or not, whether an existence is worshipped as a god or not, and in which way gods are served all stemmed from such utilitarianism. This has had both positive and negative influences on the introduction of modern atheism to China, as with this traditional mind-set people came to view atheism as a rather convenient match with how things already were, on the one hand, but atheism met with some vehement resistance on the other.

The Absence of Theological Ontology and the Utilitarian Attitude Towards Faith

In general, the philosophers of ancient China did not touch on the ontology of deities. Confucianism rarely mentioned the essence of deities or proposed self-contradictory thoughts. Even Taoism – known for advocating nature and exploring the origins of the universe through the laws of nature as well as finding the Tao[24] (as in 'The law of the Tao is its being what it is') (Lâo-3ze 1891, 68) as the origin of everything – never once spoke on the nature of ghosts and deities from an ontological perspective. Taoists indeed held to the belief that there were ghosts and deities, but they were under the Dao. As such, the sorcerers and their skills were viewed as insignificant without true omnipotence. Only unifying with the Dao (Tao) can one become a perfected individual, a spiritualized person or a sage-like human being (*zhiren*, *zhenren*, *shenren*). 'He did not eat any of the five grains but inhaled the wind and drank the dew.'[25] 'Nothing can hurt such a man. In a flood reaching the sky, he would not be drowned, in a drought melting metals and scorching mountains, he would not feel hot.'[26] 'He mounts on the clouds of the air, rides on

24 Also written Dao and often translated as 'way' or 'path'.
25 Zhuangzi, 'Xiaoyao You' (逍遙遊) in Zhuangzi (莊子).
26 Zhuangzi, 'Xiaoyao You' (逍遙遊) in Zhuangzi (莊子).

the sun and moon, and rambles at ease beyond the four seas. Neither death nor life makes any change in him.'[27] Taoists thus did not so much deny the existence of ghosts and deities based on the cosmology of the way of nature as they defined the supernatural quality of the Tao when describing the ideals of Taoism. Anyone who realized the principles of the Tao was able to, beyond the limitations of time and space and mere physical existence, obtain supernatural abilities and completely shed all forms of restraint to live in unshackled freedom. Such supernatural characteristics and abilities had obviously been derived from the practice of sorcery in ancient times.

The Legalists, out of the need for rational calculation of political interests and the establishment of national authoritarian hegemony, also denied the existence of personal entities (deities). In their view, the authority of the monarch would be impaired or even damaged if he were to acknowledge the call of destiny and monarchical virtue. Therefore, adhering to the view of the spontaneous ways of heaven as proposed by the Taoists, the Legalist school pointed out: 'Heaven does not change its constant activities; Earth does not alter its regular activities. Spring, autumn, winter, and summer do not vary their seasonal activities. From ancient times to the present, this has always been so' (Guanzi, cf. Rickett and Guan 2001, 63–5). This means that heaven runs under the control of natural laws and has nothing to do with personality, will, society, or human affairs:

> Spring and autumn, winter and summer represent shifts in the Yin and Yang. The shortening and lengthening of the seasons represent the functioning of their beneficence. The alternations of day and night represent their transformations. Thus, the Yin and Yang maintain proper order. But even if they lacked this proper order, what was excessive could not be lessened, nor what was deficient be increased. No one can add to or detract from Heaven.
>
> (Guanzi, cf. Rickett and Guan 2001, 117–18)

However, the limitation of the ideological views of the Legalists are the same as those of the Taoists. Never was an ontological point of reference utilized to discuss the essence of disembodied spirits or deities; neither was there any outright denial of supernatural entities. Rather, it emphasizes the natural attributes of heaven, just to exhort the ruler not to believe in the sense that heaven and mankind are inducted, and the ruler should match heaven with virtue:

27 Zhuangzi, 'Qiwu Lun' (齊物論) in *Zhuangzi* (莊子).

> The sage succumbs to the talentless and those without virtue when lacking power and being of low status; someone who is talentless and without virtue can transcend sages when paramount and powerful. Had Yao been a civilian but Jie a King, the country would suffer from bloody chaos. Thus, I have come to realize that power and status are far more important than intelligence and virtue.[28]

Therefore, the Legalists' theory of religious criticism did not set a definitive boundary between theism and atheism. On the one hand, they agreed with Confucianism and Taoism holding a negative and critical attitude towards divination, witchcraft, and other related activities:

> Goujian, the King of Yue, followed an oracle from a big witch and decided to incite war against Wu, but he failed and was captured, made to serve in Wu under humbled status. When he was finally able to return to Yue, he abandoned the witchcraft and established laws and kindred people to take his revenge against Wu. In the end, Fuchai, the King of Wu, was caught. It is thus clear that those who believe in the blessing of deities shall ignore the rules of law, and those who rely on the assistance of principalities shall damage national interest.[29]

They also suggested that 'If the sovereign relies on divination by tortoise shell and milfoil plant and indulges in the use of magicians and witch doctors, the spirits themselves will hasten calamities' (Guanzi, cf. Rickett and Guan 2001, 97).

However, on the other hand, the Legalists admitted that there was an unknowable force that could control one's destiny, called *tianming*. As stated in *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*: 'One's destiny, such as the birth, death and illness are all controlled by Heaven (deities). If the King were to ignore his destiny and fail to follow the path but believe in sorcerers instead, the sorcerers would dare do whatever they wished.'[30] Such limitation in ancient Chinese philosophy left an absence of rigorous definition of what a deity was in the traditional Chinese belief system. As a result of this, the concept of *shen* (deities) was made fuzzy, with indistinct boundaries and unclear meaning. An example of this is the word *tian* (heaven), which was

28 Original Chinese: 賢人而詘於不肖者，則權輕位卑也；不肖而能服於賢者，則權重位尊也。堯為匹夫，而桀為天子，能亂天下，吾以此知勢位之足恃，而賢智之不足慕也。Han Fei Zi, 'Nan Shi' (難勢) in *Han Fei Zi* (韓非子).

29 Original Chinese: 越王勾踐恃大朋之龜與吳戰而不勝，身臣入宦於吳；反國棄龜，明法親民以報吳，則夫差為擒。故恃鬼神者慢於法，恃諸侯者危其國。– Han Fei Zi, 'Shi Xie' (飾邪) in *Han Fei Zi* (韓非子).

30 Original Chinese: 死生，命也；苛病，天也。君不任其命、守其本，而恃常之巫，彼將以此無不為也。– Lü Buwei, *Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü* (*Lü Shi Chun Qiu*, 呂氏春秋).

known to have various interpretations in traditional Chinese culture. The term could refer to the Almighty, or *tianming*, as stated above, an unknowable force that could control one's destiny, or *yili*, the ethical existence of unalterable precepts, or *ziran tiandao*, the way of nature, which in turn could determine the existence of everything and the laws of motion (Wang and Xu 2014, 6–13).

Therefore, not only the philosophy of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, but even the Sinicized religion of Chinese Buddhism, Zen, were viewed by certain scholars as having embodied ideas of atheism. According to authors Wang Yueqing and Liang Xuning, Zen is referred to as an *atheistic* religion. They wrote:

> In terms of objects of belief, instead of the definition of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas being external deities in direct contrast to human beings, it rather implies the attained state of self-consciousness and intrinsic nature. With respect to methods of belief, the practice of Buddhism is based on self-confidence and self-consciousness rather than the idolatry of witchcraft and supernatural powers. As for the purpose of belief, seeking after liberation and reaching nirvana is not the destination for an absolute entity or external place, but is the status of manifesting absolute transcendence, a realm.[31]
>
> (Guan and Rickett 2001, 97)

The Japanese scholar Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki gives the reason for why he would not define Zen as a religion:

> Zen is not a religion in the sense that the term is popularly understood; for Zen has no God to worship, no ceremonial rites to observe, no future abode to which the dead are destined, and, last of all, Zen has no soul whose welfare is to be looked after by somebody else and whose immortality is a matter of intense concern with some people. (Suzuki 1964, 39)

There is no doubt that Zen, a Sinicized Indian Buddhism in ancient China, absorbed such theories as naturalism, ideals towards life, and the view on heaven and man as proposed in Taoist philosophy. For example, Zen holds that Buddha's nature is intrinsically self-sufficient and attainment of Buddhahood is by seeing into one's nature. This was obviously influenced by the Taoist concepts of realizing one's true nature and reaching a point of being at ease and free from restraint (Zhang et al. 1996). Moreover, as far as

31 Original Chinese: 因為在禪宗那裡，既沒有應當頂禮膜拜的神，也沒有應當遵循的儀式，既沒有死者往生的樂土，也沒有祈念冥福的目標，也沒有人們所強烈關心的滅或不滅的靈魂。(Wang and Liang 2014, 97).

early Indian Buddhism itself is concerned, it does contain some elements of atheism. As Émile Durkheim wrote:

> In fact, all that is essential to Buddhism is found in the four propositions which the faithful call the four noble truths. The first states the existence of suffering as the accompaniment to the perpetual change of things; the second shows desire to be the cause of suffering; the third makes the suppression of desire the only means of suppressing sorrow; the fourth enumerates the three stages through which one must pass to attain this suppression: they are uprightness, meditation, and finally wisdom, the full possession of the doctrine. (Durkheim 1964, 30)

Durkheim pointed out that there were no principles proposed within the realm of Buddhism that could clarify the notion of *deity*. He also emphasized that salvation within Buddhism is quite different from the religions advocating theism: 'Instead of praying, in the ordinary sense of the term, instead of turning towards a superior being and imploring his assistance, he relies upon himself and meditates . . . Then he is an atheist, in the sense that he does not concern himself with the question whether gods exist or not' (Durkheim 1964, 31).

While it is indeed true that there is nothing regarding personal gods as objects of worship among the many early forms of Buddhism, Buddhism (especially Zen Buddhism, known for its strong Chinese characteristics) placed more emphasis on the individual who finds or the state of finding freedom. As Wang Yousan and Xu Xiaoyue stated, 'Shakyamuni is often simply referred to as the Buddha post-enlightenment. The term is a transliteration of the Sanskrit *budda* [sic] and is translated as "consciousness" or "one who attains consciousness". It refers to a person having been freed or the state of having been freed after being awakened to the truth of the universe and life' (Wang and Xu 2014, 28).[32] This is similar to the otherworldly state of life advocated in Taoist philosophy and strongly hints at the precepts of atheism.

However, one of Buddhism's main teachings – the six realms of saṃsāra – advocate that all illiberal and emotional beings are trapped in an endless cycle of rebirth between the realms of gods, humans, demigods, animals, restless spirits, and purgatory. To Buddhists, practising their faith allows them to free themselves of saṃsāra and arrive at a state of nirvana. This thus lands them

32 Original Chinese: 釋迦摩尼成稱道以後，又被稱為佛陀，或簡稱佛。佛陀，是梵文Buddha的音譯，意譯為覺或覺著，指圓滿覺悟了宇宙人生真相而獲得徹底解脫的人或境界。(Wang and Xu 2014, 28).

squarely within the boundaries of theism in as much as they recognize the existence of supernatural entities and how supernatural powers dictate the treatment of human beings. Meanwhile, both in the early stages of the development of Indian Buddhism and at the beginning of the eastward spread of Buddhism, the personality of Shakyamuni shifted from human to god, to the extent that he became a primary object of worship among many Buddhists (Wang and Xu 2014, 28). It is from such history that Zen Buddhists reverted to doctrines regarding the innate mind and achieving sudden enlightenment as a means to remove one's worldly fetters, thereby choosing to dampen the supposed importance of formal Buddhist elements (its images, scriptures, practices, and meditative practices). Therefore, even those scholars who propose to classify Zen as a school of atheism admit that Buddhists have, over time, granted the Buddha extraordinary and supernatural powers as well as supernatural properties and characteristics (Wang and Liang 2014, 101). It is thus clear that Zen neither is a pure form of atheism nor has a definite boundary between what are and are not deities.

Based upon the above discussion, it can be seen that although various schools throughout Chinese history have challenged the existence of supernatural entities, criticized beliefs related to spirits and deities, and even denied the concept of a personal god from the point of cosmology, not a single one can be labelled as truly atheistic. This is because these schools neither discussed the question of the existence of deities from an ontological perspective nor defined a clear boundary between natural and supernatural entities when they established their respective belief systems. Instead, they arbitrarily defined deities and non-deities based on their specific needs for establishing said belief systems. As a result, although scholars of various schools proposed multiple ideas and showed different attitudes towards deities, they all fell short of clarifying their stances in terms of defining who deities are and whether they really exist.

This arbitrary adoption of concepts concerning which were gods and which were not left a huge space for secularist religion in the traditional Chinese belief system, making the concept of *shen* (deities) surprisingly compatible and inclusive. Not only the natural gods, ancestral gods, and emperor gods inherited from the primitive religion, but also countless gods were continuously created to enter this huge deity system. As such, the actual number of gods in such an astonishingly large system became truly immeasurable, and the already blurry lines between the deified and non-deified gradually melted away to the point of near non-existence. Any existence, whether it is a person, a thing, or a spirit, can be transformed into a god. No

matter if of heaven, earth, or the underworld, gods found worldly seats among monarchs and commoners, really any level of society, and the people opened the door for such gods to play their roles among them. Ancient tribal leaders, royalty, the literati, loyal heroes, totems of the Chinese nation, deceased parents, majestic mountains and rivers, and even stones or streams found in front of one's door could be granted the right to claim a godly title and thereby affect the people in terms of politics, economics, and social activities. It seems that people never paid much mind to these deities' origins, their existence within nature, or how they were deemed supernatural in the first place. Furthermore, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism were separate religious schools, with varying origins and doctrines, but as time progressed, so did their levels of integration. The earliest ancestors of the trio could be consecrated within a single shrine in a monastery or temple of some sort, allowing people to present their offerings before all of them. In the minds of the Chinese people, what it meant to be a god and clear-cut distinctions between various faiths seemed of minimal importance. What was important was that these deities remained able to serve their needs and solve life's difficulties. As a result, from the emperor all the way to those just scraping by for their families, all would choose which gods to worship from among the pantheon's gargantuan list and the compatibility between religions, thereby establishing a uniquely Chinese system of belief and practice.

According to religious views based in secularism, it is impossible to set a clear boundary between belief and non-belief in deities in traditional Chinese beliefs. As stated earlier, even Buddhism, a foreign concept that allowed one to become a monk or nun to shed one's earthliness, was transformed by the Chinese into Zen, a form of Sinicized religion in which one can maintain one's secular life while becoming a Buddhist through sudden enlightenment or epiphany. This confused the distinction between the religious faithful and ordinary people and removed the threshold between the two, thus resulting in two separate forms of what would be deemed *practice* of one's beliefs. Every citizen was to conduct the nationally recognized sacrificial duties, with birth behaving much like baptism in this sense, but beyond such duties it was up in the air what an individual would decide to believe according to their practical needs.

As early as the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou dynasties, *lingyan* was the important basis for monarchs, nobles, scholars, and ordinary folk to select objects of worship. *Lingyan* has various meanings in Chinese language; in the religious context it is associated with the effectiveness of a religious ritual or activity, namely deities consulted were believed to have made their power

felt. For example, people viewed the prosperous years of the Zhou dynasty as a blessing from heaven; they displayed a certain fear and respectful awe towards deities. However, when the royal family of Zhou began to enter a state of gradual decline, the dense god-driven atmosphere seemed to deflate, and the people of the time became suspicious of the idea of gods' existence. It was at that time that people began to write agonized poems concerning heaven and politics, called *bianfeng* and *bianya*, a new form of ode at the time. Rui Liangfu, the officer of King Li of Zhou, wrote:

> O thou bright and great Heaven,
> Shouldest thou not have compassion on us?
> . . .
> There is nothing to arrest the doom of the Kingdom,
> Heaven does not nourish us.
> There is no place in which to stop securely,
> There is no place to which to go.
> . . .
> Heaven is sending down death and disorder,
> And has put an end to our king. (Legge 1893a, 519–520, 523)

After the Zhou dynasty had fallen, the suspicion and denial of deities intensified. People sacrificed to deities in seemingly any place and at any time. This, however, was all in vain, and their faith in heaven and even in their ancestral deities collapsed:

> What crime is chargeable on us now,
> That Heaven [thus] sends down death and disorder?
> Famine comes again and again.
> There is no victim I have grudged,
> Our maces and other tokens are exhausted:
> . . .
> To the [Powers] above and below I have presented
> my offerings and then buried them:
> There is no Spirit whom I have not honoured.
> How-tseih is not equal to the occasion,
> God does not come to us.
> . . .
> Nor will God from His great heaven,
> Exempt [even] me.
> Shall we not mingle our fears together?
> [The sacrifices to] my ancestors will be extinguished.
> (Legge 1893b, 528–530)

People also began to view sorcery, with its mediating prayer and divinatory practices, in a different light. As written in the *Annals of Master Yan*, Duke Jing of Qi desired to wipe witchcraft from the earth to please God after sorcerers were unable to cure his illness. Yan Ying, the prime minister of the Qi Kingdom, countered his desire and attempted to dissuade his belief in magic. Thus arose a discussion on what is useful versus useless:

> Yan Ying said, 'Do you believe a benediction is beneficial?' Jing said, 'Of course.' Yan Ying asked, 'If you believe so, then a curse should also be harmful . . . If the sorcerer said the sin of the monarch directly, he would be guilty of slander; if he concealed the fault of the monarch, he would be to deceive Heaven. If Heaven is spiritual, it cannot deceive; if Heaven is not spiritual, then benediction is useless.[33]

The view of deities as objects to attain one's desires, which developed further under the influence of pre-Qin[34] philosophers, who were especially influenced by the Confucian idea of ethics and political viewpoints being marked by secularism, has had a profound impact on the Chinese people's beliefs and practices for thousands of years. Deities worshipped as mandated by the national sacrificial system aside, whether people believed in various gods and partook in various religions all depended on the principles of secular utilitarianism. Thus, in most Chinese people's minds, serious and definite conversion did not exist. Any deity would be worshipped if it were thought to be able to satisfy one's practical needs, but if not, no matter how noble and sacred the deity might have been, it could become an object of doubt and betrayal. Therefore, in the traditional Chinese system, the common principle of belief in a deity was taken as more of usefulness than faith.

For example, various Chinese historians have chosen not to believe in certain gods after seeing how events throughout time discredited their supposed favour. Sima Qian wrote in 'Biography of Bo Yi' in his *Records of the Grand Historian*:

> Some say, 'It is the Way of Heaven to have no favourites but always bless good people.' So, how should one judge Bo Yi and Shu Qi? Can they be called good people? They did good deeds and preserved their moral integrity to a

33 Original Chinese: "君以祝為有益乎？" 公曰："然"。"若以為有益，則詛亦有損也。 . . . . . 且夫祝直言情，則謗吾君也；隱匿過，則欺上帝也。上帝神，則不可欺；上帝不神，祝亦無益"。– Yan Ying, 'Main Part: Jian Shang (I)' (Neipian, Jianshang Diyi, 内篇·谏上第一) in *Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Yan* (*Yanzi Chunqiu*, 晏子春秋).

34 Infers the time before China was an empire.

> notable degree, but in the end, starvation took them away! Then, among his seventy disciples, Confucius only praised Yan Yuan for his studious attitude. However, Yan Yuan was always down and out; even his wife died young from hunger. Is it possible to say that Heaven always rewards the good people? Dao Zhi, who was brutal and tyrannical, killed many innocents, ate the hearts of some, and gathered thousands of henchmen to do his atrocious bidding, somehow lived to a ripe, old age. For what virtue did he deserve this? These are typical and obvious examples.[35]

Thus, Qian expressed his suspicion about heaven by asking: if this truly is the way of heaven, my confusion inspires the question: is it just?[36] The same suspicion was also shared by Fan Ye who wrote in the *Book of the Later Han*:

> Wu Xiong's family was poor when he was young. He buried his mother, paying no mind to time and location. The witch doctor said he would die without descendants but Xiong disregarded the words. The fact was that he and his sons and grandsons had successful official careers by being appointed as *Tingwei* [the highest official in charge of the legal system in the imperial court at the time].
>
> Zhao Xing, the commander of the capital district, disbelieved superstition, and broke taboos deliberately by rebuilding his official residences whenever he took an official post. However, his family held the position as the *Siwei* (Inspector General) in the imperial court for three generations.[37]

Han Feizi, a well-known Legalist, also pointed out that based on historical records, facts are always inconsistent with what is ascertained through the use of oracle, indicating that the method was far from reliable (Mou and Zhang 2000, 198). He took a war between Yan and Zhao as an example, with sorcerers on both sides having interpreted good omens upon reading tortoise shells before battle, but only Zhao won. It was for this reason that Han Feizi

35 Original Chinese: 或曰：“天道無親，常與善人”。若伯夷、叔齊，可謂善人者非邪？積仁潔行如此而餓死！且七十子之徒，仲尼獨薦顏淵為好學。然回也屢空。糟糠不厭，而卒蚤夭。天之報施善人，其何如哉？盜跖日殺不辜，肝人之肉，暴戾恣睢，聚黨數千人橫行天下，竟以壽終。是遵何德哉？此其尤大彰明較著者也。若至近世，操行不軌，專犯忌諱，而終身逸樂，富厚累世不絕。或擇地而蹈之，時然後出言，行不由徑，非公正不發憤，而遇禍災者，不可勝數也。餘甚惑焉，倘所謂天道，是邪非邪？ – Sima Qian, 'Biography of Bo Yi' (Boyi Zhuan, 伯夷傳) in *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shi Ji, 史記).

36 Sima Qian, 'Biography of Bo Yi' (Boyi Zhuan, 伯夷傳) in *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shi Ji, 史記).

37 Original Chinese: “雄少時家貧，喪母，營人所不封土者，擇葬其中。喪事趣辦，不問時日，醫巫皆言當族滅，而雄不顧。及子訢孫恭，三世廷尉，為法名家”。 …… “趙興亦不卹諱忌，每入官舍，輒更繕修館宇，移穿改築，故犯妖禁，而家人爵祿， …… 三葉皆為司隸，時稱其盛。” – Fan Ye, 'Guo Gong Zhuan' (郭躬傳) in *The Books of the Late Han* (Houhan Shu, 後漢書).

attempted to persuade others: 'Neither tortoise shell divination nor the involvement of spirits and deities is helpful to victory.'[38]

To conclude, the political utilitarian attitude of Confucianism towards religion, as well as the absence of theological ontology in Chinese history, contributed to traditional Chinese beliefs in terms of the relationship between human and deities and the ways deities are believed. On the one hand, there has been a long history of anti-religious tradition in all major Chinese philosophical schools such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, and even the highly Sinicized Buddhism, Zen. On the other hand, however, all of them to a certain extent admitted the existence of deities and the usefulness of supernatural beings in politics, society, or for individuals. This caused much confusion in Chinese people's beliefs and made it impossible to define and judge their faith using the terms theism and atheism.

Nevertheless, the traditional mind-set of Chinese people in relation to religious beliefs has significantly influenced the way atheism was introduced to and adopted in China in modern times. When the western theory of atheism, especially the Marxist view of atheism, was promoted by the CCP, it seemed a surprisingly small obstacle for Chinese people to accept the new idea as, for them, disbelieving in deities happened easily, frequently, and reversibly. However, since the deep, collective conscience of the Chinese never truly refused the potential for deities to be somewhere *out there* or the idea that people can and may at any time pray for grace to be bestowed upon them, becoming a genuine atheist has been a more difficult hurdle.

This traditional way of thinking neither creates strong ideological resistance to change or denies the existence of deities, nor causes the mind to enter a state of upset should one assert oneself to be an atheist. Moreover, the CCP's platform and authoritarian rule have served to stifle religious expression in the name of promoting atheist values by using atheism as an ideological tool, so the propagation and development of atheism in contemporary China thus encountered significant public pushback. After the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Cultural Revolution, religious activity returned and the number of those driven by faith greatly multiplied, although the education in atheism promoted by the CCP for more than half a century in modern China did have an impact on Chinese people, particularly those in urban areas.

38 Original Chinese: 龜策鬼神，不足取勝 – *Han Fei Zi, 'Shi Xie'* (飾邪) in *Han Fei Zi* (韓非子).

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44

Contemporary China

FENGGANG YANG

Modern atheism in China has borrowed heavily from the west and the Soviet Union, with little historical continuity of Chinese traditional thought. In the first half of the twentieth century, modernists were predominantly secularists who advocated replacing religion with science, aesthetics, or philosophy. In the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since 1949, Chinese Marxist–Leninist atheism has developed into two distinct versions – enlightenment atheism and militant atheism – which have very different policy implications. In the first thirty years of the PRC, militant atheism dominated and climaxed in the eradication of religion. In the era of economic reforms and opening up to the outside world, enlightenment atheism provided the ideological basis for limited tolerance of religion. In the new era of Xi Jinping's rule since 2012, militant atheism has prevailed again, leading to heightened tensions with various religions.

Modern Secularists in the Republic of China

Modern atheism in China did not emerge until the 1910s, even though there were anti-heterodox and anti-Christian campaigns in the Qing Empire. Following decades of struggles since the Opium Wars, when China was defeated and humiliated by Britain and France, the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty was overthrown through the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 and the Republic of China (ROC) was formally established on 1 January 1912. Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen, 1866–1925), the first provisional president, was a self-professed and baptized Christian. Under his leadership, the Provisional Constitution of the ROC was enacted, which includes Article 7 about religious freedom for all citizens: There is no establishment of a state religion, no religious test for public office, and citizens have the freedom to believe in any religion. This is apparently modeled on the legal arrangement

of church–state relations in the United States rather than any European or Asian countries of the time.

Atheist rhetoric was triggered by political attempts to restore monarchy and Confucian orthodoxy in the early republic. Confucianism served as the religio-political orthodoxy in dynastic China. It was enforced through the "imperial examination" (*keju*), the social institution that served as the mechanism of selecting officials primarily based on their knowledge of Confucian classics. In 1905, the Qing government abolished the imperial examination in favor of modern education in science and technology. However, the social and political influences of Confucianism persisted in old and new forms. Both before and after the establishment of the ROC, some literati-turned-intellectuals, such as Kang Youwei (1858–1926), inspired by Japan and Britain who had defeated the Qing dynasty, advocated establishing Confucianism as the state religion for the purpose of strengthening China under a constitutional monarchy. Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), the republican president, used the worship of heaven and Confucius to rally support for his attempt to restore the monarchy. He declared himself emperor in 1915, but retracted in 1916 because of widespread and strong opposition, and died a few months later.

Upon seeing attempts to restore the monarchy, some modern intellectuals perceived Confucianism as the crux of China's backwardness in absolute monarchism and weakness in confronting the imperialist powers of the west, Russia, and Japan. These intellectuals thus initiated the New Culture Movement in the mid-1910s. The New Culture Movement is commonly remembered for its legitimization of the vernacular language and championing of science and democracy. The key intellectual leaders consciously adopted the French Enlightenment discourse in their rejection of Confucianism and monarchism. In 1915, a new magazine, *Xin Qingnian* (新青年, new youth), was launched, which had a French name, *La Jeunesse*, as well as the Chinese name, on the cover. In the inaugural editorial, "A letter to youths," the founder of the magazine, Chen Duxiu (陈独秀 1878–1942), offered six instructions to Chinese youths: be free and not enslaved; be progressive and not conservative; be engaged and not removed; be global and not parochial; be practical and not rhetorical; be scientific and not superstitious. The last point refers to all religious beliefs, which were perceived as contradictory to science. Lu Xun (1881–1936), an influential literary writer and essayist, published his first short story in the vernacular language, "A madman's diary," in the magazine in 1918, which, along with several other short stories, served as scathing indictments of the traditional culture based on Confucianism. He referred to Confucian ethics as cruel and inhumane

cannibalism. The movement adopted the French anticlerical discourse and called for "down with the Confucian shops."

In the 1920s, the movement went on with campaigns to oppose Christianity as an imperialist force, *Xuanxue* (玄学, dark knowledge, metaphysics, mystical or superstitious beliefs), as the wrong view of life, and all religions as superstitions contradictory to science (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Guo Jianning 2002; Tao 2003; Wu 2010). However, the anti-religious rhetoric was not so much atheistic. They commonly criticized beliefs in gods and ghosts without making systematic arguments for atheism. Their rejection of religious and superstitious beliefs was in pursuit of modernization and strengthening of the nation. While Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi (1891–1962), a liberal modernist, advocated to replace religion with science, Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), the modernist president of Peking University who studied in Germany and France, suggested aesthetic education instead of religion. In the same vein, influential thinkers Liang Shuming (1893–1988), a Confucian scholar, suggested moral education, and Feng Youlan (1895–1990), suggested Chinese philosophy (Zhang Zhigang 2012). In short, most of the New Culture campaigners were not atheists, but secularists who rejected religion for the purposes of modernization. Nevertheless, under the ROC Provisional Constitution, religious freedom was accepted as a modern principle by most of these intellectuals. In fact, various religions flourished in the ROC (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Nedostup 2010).

On the other hand, the New Culture Movement prepared the way for the importation of Marxism–Leninism and the Soviet model of religion and society. Following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Chen Duxiu became one of the founders of the CCP, which was formally established in 1921 under the direct instruction of the Soviet-led Third International (Comintern). For the Chinese Communists, the French Enlightenment discourse was supplanted by the Bolshevik ideology of atheism. However, religion was not a main target of the CCP until after the establishment of the PRC.

Two Major Versions of Chinese Marxist Atheism[1]

In the ideological lexicon of the CCP, Marxist–Leninist atheism is a fundamental doctrine: The essence of religion is the spiritual opium of the people, and its destiny is to wither away. In its history since 1921, the

1 This section is adopted with slight modification from chapter 3 of Yang (2012).

Chinese Communist vein of atheism has manifested in two major forms: enlightenment atheism and militant atheism.[2] While all the theoreticians claim to be Marxist and insist on Marxist orthodoxy, in practice these different forms of atheism lead to very different policies toward religion. Militant atheism leads to anti-religious measures, whereas enlightenment atheism serves as the theoretical basis for a limited tolerance of religion.

Enlightenment atheism regards religion as an illusory or false consciousness, being both non-scientific and backward; thus, atheist education and propaganda are necessary to expunge the false religious ideas. In comparison, militant atheism treats religion as the dangerous opium and narcotic of the people, a wrong political ideology serving the interests of the exploiting classes and anti-revolutionary elements; thus, political force is necessary to control, reduce, and eliminate religion. In other words, if enlightenment atheism hopes for a decline in religious belief through scientific development, mass education, and propaganda, militant atheism sees the necessity of taking greater social and political measures to suppress religious organizations. While the former may imply some pity and sympathy for believers and consent to a certain degree of tolerance toward existing religions, the latter regards religious believers, leaders, and organizations as counter-revolutionary forces that should be restricted, reduced, and eliminated whenever possible. Both kinds of atheism can be found in the sanctified writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. Militant atheism shows up more blatantly in Lenin's and other Bolshevik writings, whereas enlightenment atheism has deep roots in the European Enlightenment Movement.

After 1949, the new regime drew heavily on Soviet sources regarding religion.[3] On 18 October 1950, the *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*) published an extensive review of two books recently published in China. One, *Socialism and Religion*, includes Lenin's writings and some translated articles from the *Encyclopedia* of the Soviet Union. The other, *Selected Writings on the Problem of Religion*, includes translated excerpts of Engels, Stalin, William Z. Foster (the leader of Communist Party USA), and some interpretations by Chinese Marxist–Leninist theoreticians. These textual sources amplified militant atheism and called for eradication of religion with resolute measures.

2 A third form of atheism emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century, self-designated as "mild atheism," which has been snubbed by the authorities. Mou Zhongjian, a professor at the Central University for Nationalities (*Minzu Daxue*), came up the idea of *wenhe wushenlun* (mild atheism). Following a warning by the authorities, Mou stopped speaking about mild atheism in his formal publications.

3 The information of this and the following paragraphs is primarily derived from Gong Xuezeng (2008a).

In reality, some religions had large numbers of believers and international connections, and thus were impossible to eradicate immediately. For pragmatic reasons, the CCP allowed five religions to operate legally: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Christianity (Protestantism). However, foreign missionaries were driven out of China. Church schools and charity organizations were nationalized or dismissed. Temple lands were confiscated. Moreover, monastics and clergies of these five religions must join the "patriotic" associations. Some Catholic bishops and priests and Protestant pastors who refused to join the "patriotic" associations were jailed. Other religions, including numerous traditional sects such as Yiguandao, were eliminated and many of their leaders were sentenced to death or imprisonment. Spiritual beliefs and practices such as fortune-telling, shaman healing, and fengshui (geomancy) were suppressed as feudalist superstitions.

In 1956, a long article "Marxism–Leninism on the religious problem," by Tang Rao, was published in the *Journal of Philosophical Research*. This is probably the first systematic articulation of the Marxist–Leninist view of religion by a Chinese theoretician. Tang Rao states that the essence of religious ideas is the distorted, illusionary reflection of social reality. Therefore, religion is the opium of the people. Like opium, religion may provide a temporary comfort and permit a dismissal of suffering, but it will also trick people into addiction, leading them to physical decay and making them submissive to those who would exploit them. Religion is always employed as a tool of exploitation of the people in the hands of the ruling class. Tang Rao emphasizes the fundamental antagonism between religion and communism. Accordingly, he said, the CCP must carry out uncompromising struggles against religious superstitions.[4] In 1963, "Some issues of the Marxist–Leninist view of religion," by You Xiang and Liu Junwang, was published in the magazine *New Construction*. In this article, they assert that the core of the Marxist–Leninist view of religion is to expose the reactionary essence of religion as the opium of the people. Religion will always act as poisonous opium and cannot serve but to obstruct the socialist endeavor. In a follow-up article published in 1964 in *Red Flag*, the official organ of the CCP, these authors called for weakening of religious influences among the people and accelerating the termination of religion. They stressed that the policy of freedom of religion was not designed to allow religion to fetter the masses.

4 This article does not make a distinction between religion and superstition, while the later, more nuanced political position asserts that religion and superstition are different without ever making clear articulations of those differences.

Such militant atheism preceded the eradication measures. Once the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, the "Red Guard" youths mobbed religious sites, smashed religious artifacts, burned religious books, and closed down religious venues. Monastics were ordered to return to their home villages and get married. Many of the religious leaders were tortured. Almost all of the religious leaders became manual laborers or were forced into camps of re-education through labor.

In the first three decades of the PRC, academic research on religion was no more than a means for propaganda favoring atheism. A Chinese scholar, Dai Kangsheng (戴康生 1937–2003), who lived through that period, stated: "Scholarly research on religion was considered an important means for atheist education to the masses of the people, thus it stressed the differences and conflicts between theism and atheism, and between idealism and materialism" (Dai Kangsheng 2001, 41). He further said:

> During the Cultural Revolution, under the slogans of class struggles and the guiding principle of completely breaking up with conventional ideas, religion was listed as part of the four olds [old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits] and of feudalism, capitalism and revisionism that should be eradicated. Religious beliefs of the great masses were said to be reflections of class struggles in the sphere of ideology and signs of political backwardness and reaction; religious believers were cracked down as ox-monsters and snake-demons, resulting in many framed and fabricated cases. Religion was a realm of heavy catastrophes. The Religious Affairs Bureau was dissolved; the cadres of religious affairs were censured for their crime of following the wrong political line. All religious venues were closed down. Many religious artifacts were destroyed. Religious research completely halted. The criticism of theism quickly became in practice the theoretical declaration for struggling and eliminating religion in society. (Dai Kangsheng 2001, 43)

Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Deng Xiaoping emerged as the paramount leader of the CCP and declared the end of the Cultural Revolution. At the end of 1978, the CCP launched economic reforms and open-door policies. As political pragmatism prevailed over ideological dogmatism, enlightenment atheism also prevailed over militant atheism. The embodiment of enlightenment atheism is the CCP circular "The basic viewpoint and policy on the religious affairs during the socialist period of our country."[5] Commonly known as Document No. 19 of 1982, this CCP circular served as the foundation of religious policy for about three decades. It states

5 For a translation and commentary of this CCP circular, see MacInnis (1994).

that religion in socialist China has five characteristics: (1) it will exist for a long time; (2) it has masses of believers; (3) it is complex; (4) it is entwined with ethnicity; and (5) it affects international relations. As a result of such characteristics, religious affairs must be handled with care, religious believers should be rallied for the central task of economic construction, and religious freedom should be guaranteed as long as the believers love the country, support the CCP's rule, and observe the socialist laws.

Document No. 19 acknowledges the mistakes of militant atheism. But it also clearly reaffirms the atheist doctrine: religion will eventually wither away and atheist propaganda must be pushed out unrelentingly, albeit not inside religious venues. The document admits the reality of religious persistence, but notes that the reduced proportion of religious believers in the whole population can be viewed as a partial victory for atheist propaganda.

However, the persistence of religion – despite eradication measures and powerful propaganda for three decades – was both puzzling and troubling to the Marxist theoreticians. In addition to its roots in social classes, as asserted by the then understood Marxism–Leninism, Document No. 19 concedes, without elaboration, that religion may have psychological and social roots. The circular, while providing the basis for the limited tolerance policy, set off debates among Marxist theoreticians on the nature and roots of religion. The debates started initially about the ideas behind the "opium thesis." Is Marx's statement that "religion is the opium of the people" the core, cornerstone, and foundation of Marxist atheism? Under the banner of thought liberation, some theoreticians spoke about their doubts. Many Marxist–Leninist theoreticians and academic scholars were drawn into the debates through numerous publications.[6]

There were two camps in the opium debate: the leftist camp was based primarily in Beijing at the Institute of World Religions (IWR) at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the liberal camp was loosely clustered in Shanghai and Nanjing, although there were liberals in the north and leftists in the south as well. The left-wing theoreticians insisted that the opium thesis was the cornerstone of a Marxist view of religion, whereas the liberal theoreticians and scholars offered counter-arguments within the parameters of upholding orthodox Marxism, making painstaking efforts with delicate rhetoric. They argued effectively that the opium statement is only an analogy and an analogy is not a definition; that the opium analogy by Marx should not

6 See He Guanghu (2000), Gao Shining (2000), and Dai Kangsheng (2001). The best review I have seen is Duan Dezhi (2008).

be understood in completely negative terms because opium was used as a pain reliever in Marx's time, that this analogical statement does not represent the complete view of Marxism on religion. They argued that Marx, as well as Engels, made other important statements on religion, and that this is not a uniquely Marxist view because before Marx other people had already compared religion to opium.

Eventually, the liberal understanding reigned among academic researchers. After several years of debate, many leftist theoreticians softened their position. Some of them even abandoned their original position. In this regard, Lü Daji (吕大吉 1931–2012) is exemplary of shifting positions. Mr. Lü had been a research fellow of the IWR since it became functional in the late 1970s. Initially, he was one of the major outspoken theoreticians of the northern leftist camp, who followed Lenin's emphasis that the opium statement was the cornerstone of the Marxist view of religion. By the end of the 1980s, however, Lü publicly moved away from that position. Still insisting on following the line of Marxism, Lü took a statement from Engels as the key to defining religion. Engels, the co-founder of Marxism, says in *Anti-Dühring*, "All religion, however, is nothing but the illusory reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces." Following this line but expanding upon it to include additional elements from Durkheim and other scholars, Lü offered this definition of religion in 1989:

> Religion is a kind of social consciousness, an illusory reflection in people's minds of the external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of superhuman and supernatural forces, and the consequent believing and worshipping behaviors toward such forces; it is the normalized social-cultural system that synthesizes this consciousness and behaviors. (Lü Daji 1989, 80–1)

This is clearly an atheist definition because it presumes that all gods are illusory beings. But it has also clearly moved away from Leninist militant atheism.

About a decade later, Lü further discredited Engels' statement. First, Lü said that the statement was a value judgment, biased by a strong atheist position, and thus unacceptable as a scientific definition. The scientific definition should be value-neutral or value-free, and should not negate at the outset the existence of god or gods. Second, this statement was only about the notion of god, not about the whole religion, which should include the

social organization as well as the religious ideas. Therefore, the definition of religion was reformulated:

> Religion is a kind of social consciousness regarding superhuman and supernatural forces, and its consequent believing and worshipping behaviors toward such forces; it is the normalized and institutionalized social-cultural system that synthesizes this consciousness and the behaviors. (Lü Daji 1998, 81)

Lü did not insist that this was a Marxist definition. Instead, he stated that this was a scientific definition with reference to various theories of religion, including both Marxist and non-Marxist ones. More importantly, it did not matter anymore whether the definition was Marxist or not. As Lü contended, "We should not indiscreetly negate a view or blindly accept a stand." He even expressed an appreciation for the belief in gods because of its liberating effects on primitive people. Obviously, this new definition of religion and the corresponding new attitudes have come a long way. What is interesting in Lü's perspective is that, instead of being reprimanded by the authorities for his open departure from Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy, Lü's definition was widely praised by scholars of religious research for its scientific nature and liberating effect from ideological dogmatism.

Some Chinese scholars have referred to the debates on the definition and essence of religion as the new "opium war" because of the involvement of numerous people and its social and political implications. However, the real contribution of this "opium war" was that it legitimized religious research as an academic discipline and stimulated research interests in religion among young scholars. The IWR at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences expanded, and some provincial academies of social sciences established religious research institutes, including Shanghai in 1980, Yunnan in 1984, and Tibet in 1985. Several specialty journals for religious research were launched, including the *Journal for the Study of World Religions* (Beijing, 1979), *Religion* (Nanjing, 1979), *Sources of World Religions* (Beijing, 1980), *Scholarly Research on Religion* (Chengdu, 1982), and *Contemporary Religious Research* (Shanghai, 1989), plus several other journals for internal circulation. Meanwhile, several major universities, including Fudan University, Nanjing University, Wuhan University, the People's University of China, and Peking University formed a division for teaching and studying religion, based in philosophy departments. Some books were published to introduce various religions and histories of Chinese Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and Christian missions. Throughout the 1980s, the overall tone of the publications gradually changed from completely negative criticism of religion to an increasingly balanced evaluation.

Indeed, some scholars of religious research championed the study of religion as an essential part of culture.[7] In the 1990s, the cultural approach to religion was changing. Several new journals were launched, including the journals *Buddhist Culture* (Beijing, 1989) and the *Review of Christian Culture* (Guiyang, 1990). The well-established journal of *Sources of World Religions* was renamed *World Religious Culture* in 1995. Several "journals in book form" (*yi shu dai kan*) appeared, including *Religion and Culture* (Hangzhou, 1994) and the *Collections of Studies of Christian Culture* (Beijing, 1999). Meanwhile, several publishers brought out new book series, including *Religious Culture Popular Readings* by the Qilu Press,[8] *Religious Culture* by China Construction Press,[9] and the *Religion and the World* translation series by the Sichuan People's Press.[10] A newly established publisher under the State Administration of Religious Affairs was even named the Religious Culture Press.[11] Regarding the significance of the cultural turn in religious research, Lü Daji made this observation:

> In reviewing the path of scholarship on religious research since 1949 we may say this: there has been no other theory or concept but religion is reactionary politics that is more fettering to scholars of religious research; and there has been no other theory or concept but religion is culture that is more liberating to scholars of religious research. (Quoted in He Guanghu 2000, 85)

The importance of the cultural approach to religious research is twofold. First, when religion is studied as a cultural phenomenon, its ideological incorrectness becomes unimportant and its scientific incorrectness obscure, eliminating two key criticisms of religion by both militant and enlightenment atheism. Culture has its own significance and its own life. Religion as part of culture, instead of political ideology, has its own reasons for existence and its own course of change more than primarily class interest, as articulated in Marxist materialism. Studying religion as culture, therefore, is necessary and respectable. Second, the cultural approach makes religious research more far-reaching and consequently academically rewarding. Scholars of religious research and other disciplines can write and publish works about religion and its related aspects in culture and society, such as the arts, philosophy, literature, education, politics, archeology, and science. The topics are indeed

7 For example, Ge Zhaoguang (1987), Fang Litian (1988), Zhuo Xinping (1988).
8 Including such titles as *Aspects of Buddhist Culture*, *Aspects of Christian Culture*, and *Aspects of Islamic Culture*.
9 Including *A Hundred Questions of Christian Culture*, *A Hundred Questions of Buddhist Culture*, *A Hundred of Questions of Islamic Culture*, etc.
10 Including a variety of scholarly books in the humanities and social sciences.
11 Interestingly, it is under the direct control of the State Religious Affairs Bureau. More interestingly, it has published Christian apologetics and Buddhist sutras.

limitless, and the new book series and new journals provided outlets for such scholarly studies. The enthusiasm for cultural discourses on religion, in effect, pushed the atheist advocates to the margins of academia, as will be described in the next section. Militant atheism receded to the chambers of the CCP schools. In the 1990s, several major universities established departments of religious studies, including Peking University, Renmin University of China, Fudan University, and Wuhan University.

During this time, some scholars became openly sympathetic either to religion in general or to a particular religion. The phenomenon of cultural Christians (*Wenhua Jidutu*) is the most interesting development in this regard. In the past, Chinese intellectuals as a whole were most critical of Christianity, working with the perception of Christianity as a foreign religion and a means of western colonialism and imperialism (see Ka-che Yip 1980; Lutz 1988). In the 1990s, however, quite a number of Chinese scholars began to publish works regarding Christianity with greater sympathy and empathy (see ISCCC 1997). Some of these scholars have even openly or semi-openly taken up the Christian faith themselves. These scholars are commonly based in universities and research academies in the disciplines of philosophy, history, and literature. They have translated western books on Christian theology, philosophy, and history into the Chinese language, published books and articles about Christianity, and lectured on university campuses to introduce Christianity into academia. It is the cultural approach that has legitimized such activities within the various academic settings, for such scholars often claim to be studying and introducing western culture itself, and not religion *per se*. These "cultural Christians" have stirred up a Christianity fashion among college-educated urbanites, while underground house churches have spread with zeal in rural areas. Many college students and intellectuals have been drawn to Christianity initially through reading the publications of the cultural Christian intellectuals rather than through contact with churches or Christian believers.

Because of their prolific publications and enthusiastic promotion of Christianity, the cultural Christians have been dubbed China's Apollos by outside observers (see ISCCC 1997).[12] There were also cultural Buddhists, Daoists, and Muslims.

While academics have become increasingly open to various theories of religion, the CCP has not wavered in its atheist stance. In the reform era, when speaking to the outside world, Chinese officials have commonly made statements

12 According to the book of Acts (18:24–8) in the *New Testament*, Apollos was a Jewish teacher and follower of John the Baptist, but became an enthusiastic and effective preacher of the Christian gospel even before his Christian baptism.

in accordance with the international norm of affirming religious freedom. Internally, however, the CCP theoreticians have never shied away from explicit expressions of atheism, and have reinforced atheism as a Marxist orthodoxy throughout the CCP schools, internal circulars, and periodic propaganda campaigns within and through the CCP. Ye Xiaowen 叶小文, the director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs between 1995 and 2009, acted as the spokesperson to the outside world about the status of religious freedom in China. However, when he spoke at the CCP Central Party School in 1997, he made his atheist position clear: "We always hope to gradually weaken the influence of religion."[13] Such a statement is revealing of the official stand of the CCP.

Gong Xuezeng is arguably the most authoritative CCP theoretician on religion in China. He has held the professorship of religious studies at the Central School of the CCP, which provides short-term training for both upper- and upper-middle-ranking CCP officials. In his 2003 book *Socialism and Religion* (Gong Xuezeng 2003), he appears to have carefully reviewed a number of the writings from Karl Marx and Frederick Engels that are relevant to religion, and summarizes the key points of the Marxist view of religion. In a 2008 article, Gong further updates his "comprehensive grasping and scientific evaluating Leninist view of religion" (Gong Xuezeng 2008b). Criticizing the dismissal of Lenin's view of religion among some Chinese Marxist theoreticians, Gong argues that Lenin enriched and developed the Marxist view of religion. By reviewing and expositing on Marx, Engels, and Lenin, Gong reaffirms militant atheism as the Marxist orthodoxy. This form of atheism continues to have much influence among CCP officials through training classes at the CCP schools and through other propaganda mechanisms. Gong's other book, *General Introduction to Religious Problems*, designated as "an official reading of the cadres," was first published in 1997 and has been updated to the third edition in 2007 (Gong Xuezeng 2007).[14] It is reportedly recommended by the CCP General Secretary and President Jiang Zeming. During my research trips in China, I routinely heard government officials and

13 Ye Xiaowen published an article in 1997, "dangqian woguo de zongjiao wenti – guanyu zongjiao wuxing de zai tantao" ("Current issues of religion in our country – a reexamination of the five characteristics of religion"), which is included in Ye Xiaowen (2000).

14 The editorial preface says, "In April 1999, then CCP General Secretary Comrade Jiang Zemin came to Sichuan on an inspection tour, during which he many times talked about the importance of ethnic and religious issues, and the importance for the CCP members and officials to understand ethnicity and religion. On April 23, General Secretary Jiang once again stressed the importance for leading officials to study about ethnicity and religion, and earnestly recommended two of the books published by our press," including this one (p. 2).

CCP theoreticians of various ranks reiterating these viewpoints on militant atheism. Some of these people seemed to have been exposed to no alternative views of religion in spite of the new "opium war" described above. As these rank-and-file CCP officials have continued to dominate decision-making regarding religious affairs, it has been impossible for any substantial change in the religious policy toward greater tolerance.

Although Document No. 19 states that the CCP must continue to carry out atheist education and propaganda, atheism actually lost traction following its publication. Atheist education in schools and atheist propaganda in mass media became sluggish amid economic reforms and opening up to the outside world. Ren Jiyu (任继愈 1916–2009), the Marxist–Leninist–Maoist scholar who was entrusted by Chairman Mao Zedong in 1964 with establishing the IWR for the purposes of "researching religion and criticizing theology" (研究宗教、批判神学), was the founding president of the Chinese Association of Atheist Studies (中国无神论学会; CAAS) in 1978 and of the Chinese Association of Religious Studies (中国宗教学会; CARS) in 1979. In 1979, Ren published an article and stated that "the essence of Marxist religious studies is a kind of scientific atheism" (Ren Jiyu 1979). In opposition, Zhao Puchu (赵朴初 1907–2000), the president of the Buddhist Association of China, published an article in a magazine of the CCP Central School, that stated that criticizing theism was absurd, and that atheist propaganda was wrong and harmful (Li Shen 2014). Meanwhile, some religious leaders petitioned the CCP to remove from the PRC Constitution the article on citizens having the "freedom of not believing religion and propagating atheism," an expression of militant atheism during the Cultural Revolution. Ren Jiyu and others made a formal proposal to the People's Congress opposing the removal of this article. However, in the climate of economic reform and opening up to the outside world, the 1982 Constitution removed this wording (Li Shen 2014, 34). This was considered a blow to atheism. In the following two decades, CARS thrived, partially in response to religious revivals, with many books being published and several journals established (Fenggang Yang 2004). In contrast, CAAS attracted fewer and fewer participants in its meetings. Publications on atheism were scarce and limited to collecting and writing about atheism in Chinese history. After a meeting in 1986, CAAS stopped functioning altogether (Li Shen 2014).

The Resurgence and Prevailing of Militant Atheism

In the 1980s, besides revivals of the five religions permitted by the party-state, paranormal spiritualities also flourished. Self-positioned as being for the purposes of physical and spiritual health, dozens or hundreds of *qigong* sects spread widely across various social strata (Palmer 2007). Among them, Falun Gong was a latecomer that emerged in 1992. With more religious features than most of the other *qigong* sects, Falun Gong quickly attracted many followers throughout China, including converts from other *qigong* sects (Lu 2005). Some criticisms of Falun Gong were published in newspapers and magazines. In 1996 the sect was deregistered by the China Qigong Research Association (CQRA), the umbrella organization that provided legality to various *qigong* sects. The CQRA was headed by some high-level officials in science and technology, including Qian Xuesen (钱学森 1911–2009) and Zhang Zhenhuan (张振寰 1915–1994). They supported "scientific studies" of *qigong* and extraordinary functions of the human body (人体特异功能). Facing mounting criticisms for various reasons, Falun Gong followers frequently gathered for protests and demanded removal of critical articles in magazines or newspapers. Finally, on 25 April 1999, about 10,000 Falun Gong followers surrounded Zhongnanhai, the headquarters of the CCP, demanding legal recognition of Falun Gong as a faith group.

In response to the rising tides of *qigong* and the "scientific studies" of extraordinary functions, some Marxist–Leninist–Maoist theoreticians, such as Yu Guangyuan (于光远 1915–2013), openly criticized these as "pseudo-science" of "modern superstitions." One of the most outspoken scientists was He Zuoxiu (何祚庥), a physicist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. In 1997, Ren Jiyu and He Zuoxiu made a joint effort to revive CAAS to combat *qigong*. Following the CAAS meeting in 1998, the association made the decision to conduct an investigation into Falun Gong and write an in-depth report about its threats to social and political stability. Upon learning about the Falun Gong gathering around Zhongnanhai on the morning of 25 April 1999, six top leaders of the CAAS, led by Ren and He, rushed to sign a petition, entitled "Urging for a swift investigation and dealing with the Falun Gong organization," along with an in-depth report, "The harms of Li Hongzhi's 'Falun Fofa' organization" as an appendix. The letter and report were hand-delivered to Zhongnanhai in the late afternoon of 25 April (see Duan Qiming 2009; also see Li Shen 2014).

It is said that the top officials under CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin also summoned scholars of religious studies at the IWR to Zhongnanhai for consultation. However, almost all scholars of religious studies had been focusing on the five religions and had neglected the phenomena of new religious movements or *qigong*, and thus had little to offer. Eventually, the militant atheists won out. A few months later, the party-state launched an all-out crackdown on Falun Gong. In the following years, all *qigong* sects were banned.

Capitalizing on this political opportunity, the militant atheists requested and received funding and launched the magazine *Science and Atheism* (科学与无神论), and revived atheist studies at the IWR in summer 1999. In early May, Vice Premier Li Lanqing made an inspection visit to the National Library, where Ren Jiyu had been the head. Ren particularly raised the issue of atheist education and the Falun Gong problem, and suggested that there should be a special magazine devoted to atheist propaganda. This was followed with a formal letter from Ren to Vice Premier Li on 14 May. Within a week, the authorities approved the magazine and appropriated funds earmarked for the magazine. Over 10,000 copies of the notification of the new magazine were sent out to propaganda departments at county levels and above. However, only eighty-three subscriptions came in. After more letters to the top leaders, Xinhua News Agency made a special news release about the magazine. However, only a newspaper in Hong Kong published it, while all media in mainland China ignored it. This was taken as an indication of the urgency of promoting atheism in the CCP and throughout the country (Zhang Xinying 2009). After several years of persistent effort, subscription numbers increased to 5000 in 2006 (Zhang Xinying 2007).

The rejuvenated atheists in the IWR became increasingly militant. Du Jiwen (杜继文), a researcher of Buddhism, was once the immediate successor of Ren Jiyu as the IWR director in 1987, but before long lost this position to others who were less hostile to religion. Upon becoming the editor of *Science and Atheism* in 1999, he made it a platform to rally atheists. In 2002, Xi Wuyi (习五一), a researcher at the Beijing Municipal Academy of Social Sciences, was reassigned to the IWR for atheist studies. In November 2005, CAAS held a conference and selected Xi Wuyi and Li Shen (李申) as deputy directors of the council. Li Shen was a loyal disciple of Ren Jiyu and once headed the Division of Confucian Studies in the IWR. However, when his politicized criticism of Confucianism as a religion stirred up strong reactions among scholars of Confucian studies and religious studies, he left the IWR for Shanghai Normal University in 2002. Both Xi and Li have become outspoken

proponents of atheism. Xi Wuyi has used Weibo, a Twitter-like microblogging platform in China, to mount frequent attacks on religious figures and practices, various religious studies scholars, and the administration of religious affairs.

However, the militant atheists were at odds with most scholars in the IWR, who held a neutral or somewhat favorable position toward religion or one of the religions. Alienated at the IWR, Li Shen moved out in 2002. After several years of struggle, Xi Wuyi also moved out of the IWR in 2009 and joined the Institute of Marxism in CAAS, where she heads the newly established Division of Marxist Atheist Studies. In 2010, the Research Center on Scientific Atheism was established with more resources. In 2011, the center began to publish a book series on scientific atheism. In 2012, it began to publish the annual collection of Marxist atheist studies (Xi Wuyi 2010, 9–10).

Once out of the IWR, Xi Wuyi and other militant atheists began open attacks on leading scholars of religious studies, especially scholars of Sino-Christian studies and those who promoted the social scientific study of religion (Jin Yijiu 2011; Qiu Yue 2011; Shen Zhang 2011; Zhao Zhikui et al. 2012; Xi Wuyi, 2013). They also criticized the policy direction of the religious affairs management for its lapse in controlling religion. They insisted on a number of points: that atheism is a necessary component of Marxism; that CCP members must be atheists; that the atheist position must be upheld in Marxist religious studies; and that atheist education and propaganda are the most effective means to combat *xiejiao* or evil cults, pseudoscience of paranormal spiritualities, and the infiltration of foreign religious organizations.

In 2016, some scholars made a final effort to contain atheism, but militant atheists, in a show of their full confidence in the new era, struck back hard by taking debates to the public media. In early 2016, Zhuo Xinping 卓新平, the director of the IWR, published an article in the scholarly journal *Studies in World Religions* 世界宗教研究, in which he seems to try to assert the discursive power of interpreting Xi Jinping's thought on religious affairs (Zhuo Xinping 2016). He argues for a soft-line approach to religious affairs, including viewing both positive and negative functions of religion in history and for religion's impact on social stability today, treating it as an issue of the masses that the CCP has relied on, actively guiding religion to adapt to socialism, and uniting religious believers for the central tasks of the "China Dream." While it may be necessary to insist that "CCP members cannot believe religion," Zhuo argues, the CCP should consider "allowing religious believers to join the party" for five reasons: (1) some words of Lenin allow it; (2) some words of the former Premier Zhou Enlai, a founding member of the

PRC, allow it; (3) some other communist parties in the world allow it; (4) there has been the reality of CCP membership among religious leaders of the religious associations;[15] and (5) there have been political arrangements and financial aid to religious associations and their leaders:

> If we can distinguish political belief and religious belief, allowing some religious leaders and elite elements to join the party would actually help our party and government in the political and social management of religion. Some people worry that allowing religious people to join the party would change the nature of the party, would let religion take over the organizational leadership of the party. This kind of saying belittles the ruling power of our party, regards our party as too fragile. On this it is completely necessary to show our party's confidence in the path, in the theory, and in the organization. (Zhuo Xinping 2016, 7)

Zhuo goes on to discuss atheist studies, rejecting the practice of using atheism as a stick to beat religious studies.

Seizing the opportunity of the National Conference on Religion Work on 22–23 April 2006, which set the tone and direction of the religious policy under Xi Jinping, Zhu Weiqun 朱维群, a former deputy minister of the United Front Work Department and currently the director of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the National Political Consultation Conference, who has been considered to be a hawk on religion and ethnic minorities, published an article in *Huanqiu Shibao* (环球时报 *Global Times*) on 4 May 2016, advocating for atheist propaganda and opposing allowing religious believers to join the CCP. He further challenged Zhuo with another article in *Huanqiu Shibao* on 21 June with point-to-point rebuttals, "Why it is not working to allow religious believers to join the Party" (Zhu Weiqun 2016c).

In summer 2016, Ye Xiaowen, the former director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, published an article in *Studies in World Religions*, "On some questions of the socialist religious theory with Chinese

15 Some leaders of "patriotic" religious associations are clandestine CCP members. Some of these became exposed during the Cultural Revolution, such as Li Chuwen in Shanghai, or became publicly known in the reform era, such as Zhao Fusan. Li Chuwen was a pastor of a Christian church in Shanghai. When the Red Guards attacked him as an imperialist walking dog, he pulled out his CCP membership card for self-protection. Zhao Fusan used to be a leader in the Beijing Christian Three-Self Patriotic Committee. Later, he was appointed as a vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and acted as a CCP secretary as well. Many people believe the Buddhist leader Zhao Puchu was a CCP member, which might be why his article could be published in the CCP organ the *Red Flag*. The current leaders of religious associations must include CCP members, which is an open secret to many researchers and officials in religious affairs.

characteristics" (Ye Xiaowen 2016). Ye appears to be close to Zhu's position, saying that the CCP must insist that CCP members cannot believe in religion; however, it is not necessary to say so openly to religious believers, telling them that CCP members cannot believe in religion and religious believers cannot join the CCP – Ye cautions officials and researchers from going too far to the left.

In response, Zhu Weiqun published an article in *Huanqiu Shibao* on 8 September 2016, "Has atheist propaganda gone overboard?" (Zhu Weiqun 2016a). Zhu accuses Ye of labeling him as a leftist. In a rejoinder, Ye published in the same newspaper "A reply to 'Has atheist propaganda gone overboard?'" on 10 September, and restated that religion will exist for a very long time, and thus religious affairs must be managed with care instead of rushing forward with harsh treatment; Ye regards it as inappropriate to bring this debate into the public media of *Huanqiu Shibao*. He also cites Lenin, clearly saying that the Bolsheviks should allow religious believers to join the party and should maintain a balance between atheism and toleration of religion.

On 12 September, *Huanqiu Shibao* published an article by Zhu Xiaoming 朱晓明, the president of the CAAS Council, in support of Zhu Weiqun, pushing for active atheist propaganda (Zhu Xiaoming 2016). In fall 2016, *Studies in World Religions* published an article by Chen Cunfu 陈村富, a senior scholar of philosophy and religious studies at Zhejiang University, in which he joins the debate in support of Zhuo's position – advocating for allowing religious believers to join the CCP and restraining atheist propaganda (Chen Cunfu 2016). He rejects regarding atheism as the basis and premise of Marxism. Finally, Zhu Weiqun published in *Huanqiu Shibao* on 23 December 2016, "Not insisting on atheism is not Marxist" (Zhu Weiqun 2016b). In the new era, under the rule of Xi Jinping, being accused of being un-Marxist could have grave political consequences for any scholar holding an academic position.

Militant atheism has prevailed without further open resistance. It has become the dominant official discourse and dictates the religious policy. It is apparent that the policy suggestions of the militant atheists through the platforms of the CAAS, the Division of Atheist Studies at the Institute of Marxism, and *Science and Atheism* magazine have been adopted by the party-state and implemented throughout China. Specifically, in 2018, the Revised Regulations of Religious Affairs took effect, which has outlawed house churches and many other religious activities that used to exist in the gray market (Fenggang Yang 2006). The authorities have also carried out a campaign of *Zhongguohua* (Sinicization or Chinafication) of all religions (Fenggang Yang 2019).

Conclusion

The war between atheists and religious believers in modern China has continued, with battles intensified in the Xi Jinping era. Nowadays, a majority of PRC people may claim to be atheist. This is due to atheist indoctrination throughout the educational system and political enforcement through the CCP and other social institutions. In reality, however, pure atheists remain a minority both in the CCP and the populace. Our analysis of the Chinese Spiritual Life Survey conducted in 2007, the best survey of religion and spirituality in China to date, shows that around 15 percent of CCP members and the general population can be considered "pure atheists" who do not admit any religious or spiritual identity, belief, or practice. In the meantime, various world religions, local folk religions, and sectarian religious movements have been widespread and most of them have been growing (Fenggang Yang 2018).

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45

Atheism in India: Twentieth Century and Beyond

RENNY THOMAS

Introduction

Recently, there have been attempts to study atheism in different disciplines, from historians to anthropologists, going beyond the conventional trajectory of studying only the west. Scholars have looked at different histories of atheism in many locations, and in that process have challenged the idea that atheism is essentially a western phenomenon. When atheism is seen as a western idea, the non-west is mostly perceived as spiritual and metaphysical. The politics involved in making certain places atheistic and certain places spiritual has to be understood, and anthropologists and historians have looked at different locations and places, and studied various forms of atheism and unbelief. This chapter is an attempt to discuss atheism in India, and to see its many meanings and many histories. In that process it challenges the monolithic reading of atheism. It argues that different places perceive and receive atheism(s) differently, and that cultural specificity of reception is important for understanding atheism in many locations.

Spiritual vs Rational: Orientalist Constructions of India

Since the publication of Edward Said's classic *Orientalism* (1978), there have been numerous attempts by social scientists across the globe to understand how the west imagined the 'orient'. This understanding resulted in rereading and rewriting the past of the 'orient'. Not too long ago, the usage of terms such as 'orient', 'other', 'savage', and 'primitive' was acceptable in disciplines such as anthropology and history, and anthropologists uncritically used these categories to analyse 'the other'.

This Eurocentric imagination of the 'other' in anthropology has been well documented in the critical writings of anthropologists such as Talal Asad and George W. Stocking, Jr (Asad 1973; 1991; Stocking 1991; 1992). With this critical turn, these categories lost their analytical valence and were considered to be derogatory and prejudiced in disciplines such as anthropology and cultural studies. In the introduction to *Orientalism*, Said writes: 'The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences' (Said 1978, 1). Though Said's discussion of orientalism was limited to the Anglo-French-American experiences of Arabs and Islam, which he calls the 'Near Orient' of Europe (Said 1978, 17), his theoretical armature was also relevant for understanding the 'Far Orient', such as India and China.

Talal Asad shows the construction of two different European images of non-European rule. He shows us how the west imagined the African political systems and Islamic political systems very differently (Asad 1973). Similarly, European orientalists understood the Islamic political system as repressive. As Asad writes,

> The functional anthropological image of political domination in the so-called tribal world: an emphasis on the integrated character of the body politic, on the reciprocal rights and obligations between rulers and ruled, on the consensual basis of the ruler's political authority and administration, and on the inherent efficiency of the traditional system of government in giving every legitimate interest its due representation. (Asad 1973, 105)

He writes: 'The orientalist's image of political domination in the historic Islamic world is very different. Here there is a tendency to see the characteristic relationship between rulers and their subjects in terms of force and repression on the one side, and of submission, indifference, even cynicism on the other' (Asad 1973, 106). Chinua Achebe also spoke of western writers' racism in their understanding and representation of African and other non-western societies. He criticized Joseph Conrad for projecting Africa as the antithesis of Europe and civilization, as a place of darkness and bestiality. Achebe questions western travellers for not reporting what they witnessed in the non-west, especially the development of technology (Achebe 2010, 18–19).

With this Saidian turn, much of the scholarship on colonialism shifted its analytical focus from the formal bureaucratic controls of the empire to the disciplinary power regimes imbued in the textual representations of India. In a study of the positivist, naturalist, and romantic representations of the Indian

Orient, Ronald Inden argued: 'Indological discourse holds that the essence of Indian civilization is just the opposite of the West. It is the irrational (but rationalizable) institution of "caste" and the Indological religion that accompanies it, Hinduism. Human agency in India is displaced by Indological discourse not onto a reified State or Market but onto a substantialized caste' (Inden 1986, 402–3). The orientalist scholarship, he argued, depicted Indian thought as inherently symbolic and mythical rather than rational and logical (Inden 1986, 403). For both the analyst and the philologist, the knowledge of those they studied were what Foucault refers to as 'subjugated knowledges' (Inden 1986, 420–1). In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault argued that the formal systematization and hierarchical classification of knowledge rendered local knowledges obscure and opaque, thereby devaluing them as unscientific and beyond cognition (Foucault 1980, 81–2). Similarly, Susan Bayly demonstrated how the particular representations of the subcontinent 'as a domain of slavish allegiances' rendered scientific their treatment of Indians as irrational, socially atomized and incapable of governing themselves (Bayly 1999, 100).

Romila Thapar, in her reading of Durkheim's and Weber's understanding of Indian society, shows how these classical sociologists had been influenced by the prevailing preconceptions about India, which they surprisingly tended to accept uncritically (Thapar 2013a, 58). Thapar writes:

> Max Weber was clearly influenced by the concept of Oriental Despotism and, although he does not elaborate on this point, he saw Indian society basically as a static society. Whereas he does see at least three faces to the form of Modern Europe in Judaism, Greco-Roman antiquity and medieval Europe, in the case of India and China, he views them almost as faceless monoliths. (Thapar 2013a, 53)

Elsewhere she notes that the earlier emphasis on religion and mysticism as being characteristic of Indian culture, to the virtual exclusion of rational ways of systematizing knowledge, was reinforced by some aspects of German romanticism (Thapar 2013b, 29). While criticizing various western philosophical, Indological, and historical interpretations of India's past, she argued that 'the debate on the nature of Indian society and history was in many ways an exercise in theory, drawing upon existing European controversies. In this debate the Oriental culture being examined seems largely to have become an arena for trying out the validity of these ideas' (Thapar 2013b, 32).

J. N. Mohanty argues that Indian culture was perceived to be spiritual, and thus in opposition to the materialism of western culture (Mohanty 2001). In

a study of the imperial encounters between the cultures of India and China, Peter van der Veer refers to a longer philosophical tradition dating from Schopenhauer onwards to the particular construction of India as a spiritual nation (van der Veer 2014, 45).

The denial of contemporaneity was a major trope in these representations, and was used to justify claims regarding the need to civilize the Orient. As Renato Rosaldo pointed out in a different context, 'Imperialist nostalgia occurs alongside a peculiar sense of mission, "the white man's burden," where civilised nations stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones' (Rosaldo 1989, 70). The denial of the contemporaneity worked in myriad ways to construct the *other* identity. For instance, by denying the presence of rationality, materialism, and science in India, it allowed the west to justify their act of 'introducing' science in India, eventually leading them to 'civilize' and 'rationalize' the 'irrational' Indians. Johannes Fabian defines this as the *denial of coevalness*, which meant 'a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse' (Fabian 1983, 31).

One can argue that the dominant trope of Indian spirituality and mysticism cast a shroud over a much-needed engagement with ideas of rationality, non-belief, and atheism in India. Much of the discussions on science, atheism, and religion occurred on separate planks, and it's not surprising that the limited western engagement with the cultures of rationality, atheism, and the development of science in India testify to the continued prevalence of orientalism in social sciences.

Absence of Atheism

The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) Survey on the sociology of knowledge shows that the majority of studies on science, technology, and knowledge in India were primarily undertaken by Indian scholars (Sujatha and Sengupta 2014). However, there have been few attempts by anthropologists and historians to understand rationality, rationalist movements, and atheism in India. In an ethnographic study of the organization '*Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti*' (Organization for the Eradication of Superstition), Johannes Quack shows how attempts were made to encourage a scientific temper and combat beliefs and practices regarded as superstitious (Quack 2011; also see Copeman and Quack 2017). There do not exist many works on atheism in India, though there have been attempts recently to understand different forms of atheism and unbelief in

the Indian context (Quack 2011; Thomas 2016; 2017; Copeman and Quack 2017). Studying atheism in different locations has become important as it challenges the Eurocentric reading of atheism, and there is an emerging interest in scholarship that looks at varieties of atheism and its ambiguous nature in different locations (see Gray 2018).

Bernard Lightman shows that the idea of atheism and its alleged connection with science varied in different times and spaces. He writes:

> Whereas Dawkins asserts that atheism lies at the heart of modern science, Sir Isaac Newton, the great hero of the seventeenth century scientific revolution, believed that the scientific study of nature revealed the existence of universal laws of nature that could be grasped mathematically. The existence of natural law led, in turn, to the recognition that a creative deity had provided an order to nature. (Lightman 2011, 252)

In the context of Britain, Lightman shows that during the time of Newton atheism was considered to be inimical to the scientific spirit, and Newton himself argued against atheism (Lightman 2011, 252). He stresses the importance of context for understanding how certain forms of unbelief came into existence in different societies during certain historical conjunctures. He problematizes the universal claim of atheism by showing its emergence as a school of thought, in response to various social, political, and intellectual discourses specific to Europe at a particular time (Lightman 2002; 2011). For instance, the historical and social situation of Britain and the prevalence of scientific discourses such as the theory of evolution paved the way for Thomas Henry Huxley to propose the idea of agnosticism in 1869 in one of the early meetings of the Metaphysical Society in London (Lightman 2002; 2011, 266). As Lightman puts it, 'The space in Britain created by Huxley, Spencer, and their allies for intellectuals to connect science to unbelief was somewhat unusual. Although Western intellectuals in other national contexts attempted to create a similar space in their countries during the second half of the nineteenth century, they were not as successful as their British counterparts' (Lightman 2011, 270).

Indian Atheism(s): The Twentieth Century and Beyond

India witnessed various reforms in the twentieth century, and became an independent nation in 1947. What is significant to note is that although atheism was not seen as state ideology, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, strongly supported and welcomed science and scientific

thought. Nehru thought that science and the scientific outlook were the best way to deal with religious obscurantism and superstitious beliefs in India. The twentieth century resulted in the formation of various ideas and movements that promoted atheism at different levels. The century witnessed the emergence of various atheist thinkers and activists, who were also part of the struggle for India's independence. This section will focus on a few of the important atheist leaders and their contribution in the growth of atheism and rationalism in India.

Atheism for Equality

When we think of the twentieth century, the name of the revolutionary Bhagat Singh (1907–31) comes naturally as he was one of the most important revolutionary leaders of the time. He published his essay "Why I am an Atheist" in 1931,[1] which went on to become one of the most read essays of all time in India. He challenges the existence of God and argues that atheism for him means freedom to think and act. He had read Marxist literature and was highly influenced by it. He writes in his essay that he became convinced by various atheist thinkers such as Bakunin, Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky. He challenges the Hindu idea of *karma* and asks the question:

> One Genghis Khan killed a few thousand people to seek pleasure in it and we hate the very name. Now, how will you justify your all powerful, eternal Nero, who every day, every moment continues his pastime of killing people? How can you support his doings which surpass those of Genghis Khan in cruelty and in misery inflicted upon people? I ask why the Almighty created this world which is nothing but a living hell, a place of constant and bitter unrest. Why did he create man when he had the power not to do so? Have you any answer to these questions? You will say that it is to reward the sufferer and punish the evil doer in the hereafter. Well, well, how far will you justify a man who first of all inflicts injuries on your body and then applies soft and soothing ointment on them? How far the supporters and organizers of Gladiator bouts were justified in throwing men before half starved lions, later to be cared for and looked after well if they escaped this horrible death. That is why I ask: Was the creation of man intended to derive this kind of pleasure? (Singh 1931)

What is important to note in Bhagat Singh's atheism is that for him atheism was a weapon to change the feudal mentality of reverence and respect and in that process create a world of equality. In the Indian context, he thought atheism could challenge the existing forms of inequality such as feudalism

1 This essay is available on the website www.Marxists.org.

and caste inequality. Bhagat Singh's life history is similar to many atheists of his time who grew up in deeply religious family backgrounds and challenged their beliefs over a period of time. What is important to note here is that although Bhagat Singh was influenced by Marxism, he used the same to talk about issues that are unique to the Indian situation, such as feudalism, the caste system, and religious polarity. He continues to be an important cultural and revolutionary figure among today's youth.

A thinker and reformer who was one of the most important figures in the twentieth century to challenge caste inequality using atheism and rationalism was E. V. Ramasamy (1879–1973), popularly known as Periyar. Like Bhagat Singh, Periyar grew up in a religious household (Pandian 2007, 188). Periyar's critique of religion came primarily because of his own engagement with Hinduism as he was a wandering sadhu who worked with the upper caste Brahmins, visiting various religious places. After two years of life as a sadhu, he became convinced of the corrupt practices of the Hindu religion (Pandian 2007). He left his active engagement with mainstream politics to engage with important questions of caste inequality when he realized the mainstream political organization of his time, the Indian National Congress, of which he was a member, was failing to do so. He started the Self-Respect movement in 1926 for a rationalist critique of caste, religion, and mainstream nationalism (Pandian 2007, 191).

Periyar's critique of religion and caste came from his own engagement with Marxism. He had published a Tamil translation of Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*, and visited Moscow, a place he thought was a new world (Pandian 2007, 192–3). Periyar embraced rationalism and atheism as a new way of thinking about a world of equality. He popularized the slogan "He who created god is a fool, he who propagates god is a scoundrel, and he who worships god is a barbarian" (Pandian 2007, 196). This slogan summarizes his views on religion. Here, by critiquing God, he not only challenges the existence of God, but also challenges the caste-based discrimination within Hinduism. Critique of religion and God for Periyar was also a critique of caste and gender inequality. Again, we see here that Periyar used atheism and rationalism to talk about local issues, rather than talking about universal metaphysical questions of the existence and non-existence of God.

Periyar very clearly used atheism and rationalism not only to attack God in general, as that was not his immediate concern, but to challenge the dominance of Brahmanical Hinduism, which for him was the reason behind the existence of caste inequality. Periyar thought Brahmins were the cause of caste and gender inequality (see Aloysius 2019), and challenging Brahmanism

would be a way to challenge caste and gender inequality, and eventually to build a world of equality.

Gora (Goparaju Ramachandra Rao 1902–75) was an important atheist of the twentieth century, who thought atheism would lead to equality. He wrote in 1973 that 'those who oppose atheism in any form, betray their vested interests in inequality in some kind or other' (Gora 1992, 18). With this aim, Gora started various initiatives to spread atheism as a way of life. Gora and his wife, Saraswathi Gora, were freedom fighters and both of them spent most of their lives travelling to different parts of India, spreading atheism. Gora was an important figure in popularizing atheism in the second half of the twentieth century. He founded the Atheist Centre in 1940 in the village of Mudunnur in Krishna District, Andhra Pradesh, and shifted to Vijaywada in 1947. He also organized the First World Atheist Conference. Gora started *Sangham*, the first Atheist Telugu weekly, in 1949. There, he answered various questions related to atheism, and started the column Questions and Answers. He also edited *The Atheist*, an English monthly, from 1969 (Gora 1992). It is important to note that he did the exercise in both English and Telugu, to attract the educated youth and non-English-speaking ones. He continued to do this exercise till his death in 1975 (see Gora 1992). The Atheist Centre continues to work on the principles shaped by Gora by regularly organizing World Atheist Conferences in different parts of India. In 1990, the Centre celebrated its golden jubilee by organizing an international conference. Atheism was seen as a weapon to spread equality in a caste-ridden society like India. Here, one can see a connection between the three figures that we have discussed. For many of these thinkers, as the historian M. S. S. Pandian argues, 'a critique of Hinduism could simultaneously be, and be understood as, a critique of the Brahmin and the Indian nation' (Pandian 2007, 88).

Undoubtedly, the most important thinker and reformer in the twentieth century to use rationalism and the scientific outlook to champion the cause of caste eradication was B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), who was also the architect of the Indian Constitution. He kept alive rational and universalist values of equality even when he embraced Buddhism. For Ambedkar, eradication of caste inequality in India would be possible only with the eradication of the Hindu religion, which sanctions the caste-based inequalities (Ambedkar 2014).

There were many such thinkers and writers in the twentieth century who spent their lives spreading atheism and rationalism. Twentieth-century India also witnessed the spread of communism in many parts of India, such as Kerala and West Bengal. In 1957, under the leadership of E. M. S. Namboodiripad

(1909–98), the Indian state of Kerala became one of the first democratically elected communist governments in the world. This in many ways also popularized rationalism and the scientific outlook. The twentieth century also witnessed the origin of various atheistic and rationalist associations in different parts of India. The Indian Rationalist Association was founded in 1949 to encourage scientific and rational thinking by conducting various campaigns and classes against superstitious practices.

Lived Atheism

Having discussed how in the twentieth century atheism and rationalism grew in India, it is pertinent to discuss atheism in contemporary India. Although it was not an in-depth discussion of atheism in the twentieth century, it is clear that atheism and rationalism shaped the idea of modernity in India. Despite the ideas of atheism and rationalism in the twentieth century coming from the west, it is also clear that these western ideas changed in response to the Indian context. As Edward Said argued in his classic essay 'Traveling theory', 'Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Such movement into a new environment is never unimpeded. It necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the place of origin' (Said 1983, 226). The atheism and rationalism of the twentieth century were concerned about caste inequality and discrimination, and religion in general. In order to understand the nature of atheism, it is important to look at the everyday life of atheism. The following is an ethnographic discussion of how Indian scientists lived atheistic lives in their culturally specific way.

The debates about the apparent incongruity between rationality and religion in India led me to undertake ethnographic fieldwork with scientists in Bangalore.[2] Much of the existing literature on Indian scientists fetishizes their religiosity and spirituality, and emphasizes scientists' beliefs in ideas of karma, the afterlife, etc. (Keysar and Kosmin 2008). Though some studies discussed atheist scientists, they have been more keen to document the religious and spiritual lives of scientists (Gosling 2007; Brown 2012). This has resulted in the unavailability of literature on the non-religious or atheistic

2 Fieldwork was conducted among scientists in three institutions based in Bangalore: the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), and the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research (JNCASR), from February to December 2012, and later in 2016.

lives of scientists in India (Thomas 2017). It is pertinent to note that there is no lack of scientists who described themselves as atheist or non-religious in Indian universities and research institutes. Historically, one can look at the life trajectories of Indian scientists such as M. N. Saha to understand the radical views he harboured on the question of 'science and religion', and on the supremacy of religion (Saha 1937, 2010). During my fieldwork, I met many scientists who called themselves 'atheists', 'agnostics', and 'materialists'. However, as I will demonstrate, parallels cannot be drawn between their ideas of atheism or non-belief and their western counterparts, and also it is problematic to look for a homogeneous category called 'atheists'. The history of the practice of atheism in the west is different, and each location has produced its own understanding of atheism and unbelief.

The ethnographic discussion of scientists will show that the western understanding of atheism as a philosophy of godlessness and anti-religious sentiment has its limitations in the Indian context. Although the western ideas of atheism and agnosticism travelled to many other non-western sites due to colonialism and trade relations, it was changed and modified according to the situation of the destinations. As David N. Livingstone argued,

> Ideas and images travel from place to place as they move from person to person, from culture to culture. But migration is not the same as replication. As ideas circulate, they undergo translation and transformation because people encounter representations differently in different circumstances. If theories must be understood in the context of the period and place they emerge from, their reception must also be temporally and spatially situated. (Livingstone 2003, 11–12)

It is in this context that I discuss how the atheist scientists lived an 'atheistic' life in their culturally specific way.

Vishnu Ramamurthy,[3] a renowned physicist who teaches theoretical physics at the IISc in Bangalore told me that he is totally irreligious and stated that he finds it atrocious to listen to people who uncritically engage with religion. He said many people in the name of religion promote superstitions and many irrational activities. He stated that his parents were not very religious, and the upbringing in a less religious family helped him with his training in science to critically see religion and the idea of God. Likewise, M. Sastry, a distinguished biologist, argued that his science education helped him to understand the complexities of life, and to question the existence of God. He said:

3 All names are anonymized for ethical reasons.

> I do not believe in God even in the psychological sense of the term. Religion has no role in my life. I am an atheist. Atheists are as normal individuals as theists. India, for instance, has had a large following of atheistic ideas (Lokayatas). Perhaps there are more atheists among scientists compared to others not trained in science, although I am not sure.

It is notable that he mentions the Indian tradition of non-belief and atheism. Many non-believing scientists I interviewed were aware of Indian schools of atheism and materialism. They observed that India had a rich tradition of atheism, and they are inspired by some of these schools of thought.

Poornima, who has done important work in the area of molecular reproduction and genetics, said:

> I am an atheist. I am a complete atheist. I don't think you need God to be a good person. I honestly believe that much of the natural phenomena will be explained by science. I don't think there is anything beyond that. In that sense I am a true atheist. I don't think there is any need to invoke superior being; neither do I think you need a God to be a good person. You can be a good person and a good atheist. I don't think I am a bad person because of my atheism.

'I am a Liberal Non-theist, but Not an Atheist': Varieties of Atheism

When the above-discussed scientists preferred to identify themselves as 'atheists', some of them chose to see themselves as 'agnostics' and 'sceptics', and 'non-theists'. Geetika Bavare, a biochemist, told me that she is very sceptical of the idea of God and religion, though she wouldn't see herself as an atheist. Likewise, a chemist told me that he prefers to call himself an agnostic, not an atheist. Gayatri, a biologist who works in the area of molecular reproduction, said:

> I wouldn't call myself as an atheist. I personally do not go to religious places, or do any practices. I did not have the urge to go and seek God at any point. It's the same now also. We have a God's area at home like every household has. My mother does Puja daily. Do I miss doing it? No; Do I feel bad about not doing it? No. Does it mean that I will never do it? No, if I will be interested to attend tomorrow, I will do it. At this point of my life I am not seeking God, and I don't want to also. In that sense I see myself as an agnostic.

Though some of these scientists argued that it is their training in western science that helped them to question the existence of God, they did not

believe that it is merely their western education that changed their understanding of God. They strongly stated that one can very well be a scientist and an atheist as India had a rich tradition of materialism and atheism. Some of them argued that the Indian schools of atheism and materialism did influence them deeply and they were very proud of these schools. Though some of these scientists considered Darwin to be their hero, they also took India's contribution to the understanding of rationalism and atheism seriously. It will be a Eurocentric analysis of culture of non-belief in contemporary India if one doesn't take into account Indian schools of rationalism and atheism and their influence on contemporary scientists. For instance, Quack's study of Indian rationalists informs us that many of the rationalist associations in India consider *nāstika* (heterodox) philosophies like the *Lokāyata* and *Cārvāka* to be their early forerunners (Quack 2011).

Narayana Shastry, an influential aerospace scientist, works in the field of fluid dynamics associated with aerospace and atmospheric sciences, and also writes on Indian philosophy. During the interview he spoke extensively on Indian traditions of atheism and materialism, and described how he was fascinated and influenced by these schools of thought. Rather than western science and atheism, it was Indian schools of thought that influenced him. He said he wouldn't call himself an atheist; rather, he calls himself a 'liberal nontheist'. He said:

> I don't practice any rituals associated with religion. I stopped wearing the sacred thread long ago. I do not call myself an atheist. My view of God is very similar to that of Indian school of *Samkhya*. I do not consider myself as an atheist. I certainly consider myself as a non-theist. Samkhya was known as *Nireeshwara Samkhya*; it is not 'atheist' as such, but it is non-theist. It doesn't say there is no God. It says 'it is not necessary to know God'. You will be astounded if you read Samkhya. It says there is no evidence for *Easwara*; It does not say there is no *Easwara*, but says that there is no evidence for *Easwara*. To be specific, I consider myself as a liberal nontheist. I cannot be an atheist for sure. As I said I am very much like the Samkhya philosophers.

He has a strong understanding of the history of science in India and Indian philosophy. He has written various articles on Indian philosophy and science. During the interview he lamented the fact that Indians themselves did not value their traditions. After his retirement, his interest in philosophy grew, stemming from the discovery of the rich traditions of rationalism and materialism within Indian philosophical systems. He argued that these concepts were part of the various Indic schools of thought. Referring to the

influence of these traditions on his own intellectual and personal lives, he says:

> It was twenty years back I started looking at Indian texts seriously, once I retired from my scientific career. When I started reading Indian classical philosophy, I approached it with a certain sense of scepticism. I had a different understanding of Indian philosophy then. I thought India was superstitious, did not have science, not rational etc. I started reading the classical Indian scientists in original, in Sanskrit. I made some surprising discoveries which many people had not noticed before. I found things which surprised me. I call the old texts Indic. Because if you say it is Hindu it excludes others. Hindu is not our word; it is somebody else's word. The term 'Hindu' is not sufficiently inclusive. What do you do with Buddhist and Jain texts and Islamic contribution then? So, I call it Indic. So, I talk about Indic science, not Hindu or Indian science. I found out when I was looking at those texts that the old Indic philosophers and scientists were not superstitious or irrational. Of course, their methods and techniques were very different. If one looks at them seriously one finds scientific philosophy, it has to do with epistemology. All of this took time to understand. I begin to understand that there were large numbers of scientists in classical India. If you look at classical scientists like Aryabhatta and Caraka there are limited references to God in their texts. I found it fascinating. In fact, far less on God than in the western literature right down to Newton's times. It was revelation to me. In Aryabhatta's text there is only once where he mentioned the word spiritual; that is a reference to Brahma. It is fascinating, isn't it? Samkhya philosophy for instance is very radical. My theory is that in one way or another many of these classical Indic philosophers followed Samkhya philosophy. Samkhya was known as *Nireeshwara Samkhya*. It is not 'atheist' as such, but it is non-theist. It doesn't say there is no God. It says 'it is not necessary to know God'. It says that there is no evidence for *Easwara*. It does not say there is no *Easwara*. What I want to tell you is that rationalism and idea of non-belief is nothing new to Indic tradition. One doesn't need to go to the West to find them.

His narrative problematizes the orientalist understanding of classical Indian philosophical texts as lacking in rationality and atheism. He argued that one has to take the Indic systems of thought seriously to understand how rational and radical Indian schools of thought were. As he said, he doesn't identify himself as an atheist since *Samkhya* doesn't say that there is no God, but it says there is no evidence for God. Philosophers have written about Indian rationalism and empiricism. J. N. Mohanty, for instance, informs us that there is a strong empiricist strand in Indian thought. This is testified by the primacy of perception, importance of an 'exemplifying instance' (*drstanta*) in the syllogistic theory, and by a conspicuous lack of modal thinking ('possible worlds', 'necessity', etc.) (Mohanty 1992, 269).

Similarly, D. P. Chattopadhyaya argued:

> Atheism represented the widest field of clear agreement among the leading representatives of traditional Indian wisdom. The overwhelming majority of them were committed atheists. By this, again, is meant that they were not simply indifferent to the question of God, as some of the early Greek philosophers perhaps were. The Indian philosophers, on the contrary, faced the problem of God and they reached the reasoned conviction that His existence could be admitted only at the cost of a clear logic. It has hardly any parallels in the history of world-philosophy. (Chattopadhyaya 1969, 3)

Chattopadhyaya argued further that

> In the case of *Lokayatas*, atheism formed part of a clear and consistent materialistic outlook. They must have found it necessary to deny God in order to make room for their doctrine of the exclusive reality of the material elements. The same was broadly true of the *Samkhya* philosophers, though their affiliation to materialism is not so readily admitted. In any case, since the *Samkhya* view the world came to being from primeval matter called *prakrti* or *pradhana* without the agency of any efficient cause altogether, it is not difficult to see why its followers were among the determined atheists in Indian philosophy.
>
> (Chattopadhyaya 1969, 6)

As scientists like Narayana Shastry emphasized, it is very significant to understand the Indic ideas of rationalism and atheism in order to engage with the practice of non-belief in India today; rather than looking at the western understanding of atheism. Every culture has its own ideas and practices of non-belief. It is true that Indian scientists were influenced by their training in western science and the western ideas of rationalism and atheism, but they didn't accept it blindly. They modified and reshaped it. These western ideas of rationalism and atheism also encouraged them to look at Indic notions of rationalism. In order to understand atheistic practices of Indian scientists, one has to go beyond the 'scientific atheism' of the west, and try to see how these scientists really perceived atheism in their everyday lives.

Stephen LeDrew argues that the nineteenth-century split in western atheism produced two distinct streams: the first is scientific atheism, closely associated with Darwinism and Enlightenment rationalism; the second is humanistic atheism, aligned with the rise of the social sciences and pioneered by Marx and Feuerbach (LeDrew 2012, 70). In scientific atheism, LeDrew argues,

> Non-believers focused their engagement with religion on science, explanation and knowledge vs. ignorance; in this view religion could be eradicated with scientific critique and education. In humanistic atheism the focus

> turned to religion as a social phenomenon and a symptom of alienation and oppression; in this view the answer to the social problem of religion was to be found in the broader problem of human suffering; if these could be eradicated religion would disappear. (LeDrew 2012, 1)[4]

The contemporary western understanding of atheism which LeDrew calls 'New Atheism' is a movement spearheaded and shaped by the writings of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennet, and, to a lesser extent, Christopher Hitchens (LeDrew 2012, 81). This 'New Atheism' of the west, LeDrew argues, is an extension of scientific atheism that emerged in the Victorian period (LeDrew 2012, 81). The New Atheists, LeDrew argues, wield the Victorian discourse of an eternal conflict of religion and science (LeDrew 2012, 81). Terry Eagleton calls the New Atheists or scientific atheists like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens 'liberal rationalists' (Eagleton 2012).

Indian scientists who called themselves 'atheists' or 'non-believers' clearly did not subscribe to these traditions of atheisms. They did not identify themselves with liberal rationalists like Dawkins, nor did they subscribe to the philosophy of scientific atheism or New Atheism. As David N. Livingstone suggested 'if there are geographies of belief, so too are there spaces of unbelief' (Livingstone 2011, 284).

As noted, even in the twentieth century, the rationalists and atheists were concerned about local issues rather than the universal metaphysical questions of the existence or non-existence of God. It was about the question of caste and gender inequality, and atheism and rationalism they thought would bring about human equality. Gora even thought atheism was not only a critique of religion, but aims at all-round development of the personality of the individual (Gora 1992). It is important to look at the specific ways in which atheism was received in different locations and at different times.

However, it is also important to note that the religious right-wing, with their claims of ancient sciences,[5] never agreed with the atheists and rationalists and tried their best to silence their voices.

Death of Atheists and Rationalists

I am not going to discuss in detail the killings of various atheists and rationalists in India. However, a few cases are very important to mention

4 Also see Ruse (2015), LeDrew (2015), and Gray (2018).

5 See Subramaniam (2019) and Nanda (2010) for a discussion on the claim of ancient sciences by Hindutva right-wing forces.

here to understand the contemporary life of Indian atheism and rationalism. A much talked about case was the murder of the rationalist activist Narendra Dabholkar (1945–2013), a trained medical doctor and a rationalist who founded the Maharashtra-based Andhashradha Nirmulan Samiti (ANiS, Organization for the Eradication of Superstition).[6] His murder in 2013 was a major news item in India, and there were various protests and criticisms of the government.

When one looks at Dabholkar's activities and writings, it is very clear that his rationalism was to end superstitious beliefs and practices. He challenged everything that is dear to the Hindu right-wing, such as astrology, Vastushastra, and Godmen and Godwomen (Dabholkar 2018). He wrote extensively on the need to use a scientific outlook to challenge religion and superstitions. He wrote: 'Once a scientific outlook is adopted, things like magnetic therapy, Reiki, vastushastra and astrology become unacceptable. Similarly, the so-called existence of moksha, brahma, parabrahma, heaven, soul, universal soul and such concepts, too become unacceptable' (Dabholkar 2018, 26). He criticized magical and superstitious practices in other religions as well (Dabholkar 2018).

The killings of other rationalists such as M. M. Kalbugi (1938–2015), Govind Pansare (1933–2015), and Gauri Lankesh (1962–2017) have to be mentioned here as well. What was common among all of them was their activities and writings against superstitious beliefs and practices. All of these rationalists and atheist activists were following the path of the twentieth-century atheists that we have already discussed, dreaming of a world of equality. They used atheism and rationalism to fight against caste-based inequality and religious superstitions.

Conclusion

The practice of atheism in the Indian context is not free from its religious and cultural influences. When we study atheism in different cultures, we need to take into account the cultures of these societies, rather than expect them to agree with their counterparts from other locations. We saw how E. V. Ramasamy responded to the domination of Brahmanism, and we also discussed Bhagat Singh and Gora's priorities as Indian atheists and rationalists. The major challenge for them was not to solve the metaphysical question of whether God exists or not, though that of course was part of

6 See Quack (2011) for a detailed ethnographic discussion of ANiS.

their atheistic lives. They were more concerned about the local issues such as caste-based discrimination, and various superstitious beliefs and practices, that affected the everyday lives of people. They thought these practices made the poor more vulnerable. The solution they provided was to embrace rationalist thought and challenge all superstitious practices. They dreamed of a society without caste and gender discrimination. As B. R. Ambedkar argued, the solution to ending caste discrimination and untouchability was to annihilate caste, and he critically engaged with Hindu scriptures to show how it sanctions case-based hierarchies (Ambedkar 2014). E. V. Ramasamy did the same as well. Local issues and particular experiences shape the way atheism works in different locations. If we are looking for universal questions such as 'Does God exist' in non-western locations, we will not be able to grasp the everyday life of atheism. Atheism was used differently for different reasons in various places. We need to think beyond the western imagination of atheism and see how local cultures reshape atheism(s). As Bernard Lightman and David Livingstone argued, one has to put atheism in its place and read the discourse of atheism in its specific historical and intellectual space (Livingstone 2003; 2011; Lightman 2011). One needs to see new age atheists like Dawkins in their context, rather than generalizing and expecting their views to be 'universalized'. As Terry Eagleton, in his critical review of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, clearly puts it: 'It belongs to a specific context. There is a very English brand of common sense that believes mostly in what it can touch, weigh and taste, and *The God Delusion* springs from, among other places, that particular stable. At its most philistine and provincial, it makes Dick Cheney sound like Thomas Mann' (Eagleton 2006, 34). We need to seriously acknowledge this provinciality when studying atheism and the ways in which it was used, welcomed, and rejected in different locations.

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The Soviet Union

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Introduction: Soviet Atheism in Theory and Practice

The Soviet project presents the first case in which atheism was not just an abstract philosophical position on the question of God's existence, but a tool used by a revolutionary state in the service of a political project. This project aimed at nothing less than the transformation of the meaning and order of the world, and for the revolutionary state, one of the biggest threats to this was the continued existence of institutions, beliefs, and ways of life that challenged Soviet claims to a monopoly on truth and power. Guided by Marxist–Leninist theory, the Bolshevik Party that stood at the head of the new Soviet state therefore construed religion as an obstacle to the successful construction of Communism, which made religion not just a theoretical question that needed an answer, but a practical problem that needed a solution. The party turned to atheism to solve this problem.

Over the course of its history, atheism in the Soviet Union assumed different definitions and functions, which reflected how the party understood the problem of religion – that is, the nature of the threat that religion posed to the Communist project. From its pre-revolutionary origins as a position of dissent among the radical intelligentsia (Frede 2011), after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, atheism became the Bolshevik political order's normative worldview position, as well as its tool for establishing a monopoly on power and truth. It did this by combating religion as a phenomenon that challenged Communism's claims to political, ideological, and spiritual authority. The development of Soviet atheism reflects the different stages, or fronts, in this battle, as well as the regime's shifting priorities. On the political front, atheism became "militant" in order to combat the authority of religious institutions. On the ideological front, atheism became "scientific" in order to address religion's claims to theological, philosophical, and epistemological

truth. On the spiritual front, Soviet atheism redefined itself as "positive" in order to compete with religion as an emotional, aesthetic, and experiential phenomenon (Smolkin 2018). What stayed consistent is that religious organizations were considered an obstacle to the creation of a Communist society, and religious worldviews were considered an obstacle to the creation of Communist individuals. What varied across the seven decades of the Soviet Union's existence was what atheism looked like, who promoted it, and what it meant to express allegiance to it (Luehrmann 2017). This chapter, then, treats Soviet atheism as a historical phenomenon without a stable transhistorical definition. Instead, it shows how Soviet atheism developed over the course of the Soviet period through its struggle with religion in both theory and practice.

But what this chapter will also show is that Soviet atheism also played some unintended roles. As an aspect of Communist ideology that had to address religion, the only legally existing form of dissent within the Soviet Union, atheism was a site where differences between ideological theory and social reality had to be negotiated. In the process, Soviet power created atheist institutions and specialists, as well as a distinct body of knowledge and set of practices for engaging with religion and atheism. Finally, and perhaps counterintuitively, atheism also became a space for asking big existential questions. While this was not the original purpose of Soviet atheist work, it adopted this role for two reasons: first, because of the shifting demands placed on it by the ideological establishment, which, in its struggle to transform Soviet society, pushed deeper into the private lives and interior worlds of Soviet people; and second, because there was no other space designated for such inquiry, since the party's official ideology, Marxism–Leninism, presupposed that all existential questions had already been answered.

The Pre-history of Soviet Atheism: Intellectual Origins

For Russian Marxists, breaking the power of religious ideas and institutions was a necessary aspect of the transition to socialism and then Communism. In addition to reading Marx and Engels, they were influenced by their own political, social, and religious experiences as subjects of marginal and persecuted social groups in a state in which the church occupied a privileged position and served as a pillar of autocratic power. In the Russian imperial context, atheism formed out of the philosophical dissent

and political rebellion by the radical intelligentsia in the second half of the nineteenth century (Frede 2011; also see other contributions in this volume). Alongside their political experiences under autocracy, many early Bolsheviks also came from disadvantaged social groups – including priests' sons who had defected from the clerical estate (Manchester 2008) and those of Jewish backgrounds who had renounced the faith of their fathers for the revolution (Slezkine 2004) – and they knew firsthand how religion determined social positions within the hierarchical structure of the Russian empire. Moreover, having themselves come from religious communities, they were aware of how relationships with ancestors, saints, and divine beings upheld entrenched power structures: the power of men over women, older over younger generations, and majorities over minorities. It was these structures that the revolutionary intelligentsia set out to challenge with socialism.

The Marxist variant of atheism emerged with the formation of the Russian Social Democratic Party (established in 1898), as the socialists worked out the correct position on religion in the two decades preceding the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Marx provided little guidance for party politics on the religious question, and generally considered atheism unimportant to the revolutionary process, which was supposed to unfold through class struggle (Thompson 2013). For Marx, religion "in itself is without content," in that its reality is constituted by social relations on earth; therefore, he prophesied, when the distorted socioeconomic foundations of injustice and suffering are abolished, religion "will collapse of itself" (Marx and Engels 2010a, 395). Since the masses would no longer need the illusory "opiate" of religion to cope with their miserable conditions, they would naturally arrive at atheism. They would "come to reason" and each could finally "revolve around himself and therefore round his true sun" (Marx and Engels 2010b, 176).

Lenin, likewise, did not devote much attention to religion and atheism before the revolution, and had little personal interest in religion (Smirnov 2013); his understanding of historical change was fundamentally materialist, and he saw religion as a feudal holdover working in the service of reactionary forces. When a contingent of early Bolshevik intellectuals proposed that the party embrace an anthropological understanding of religion and use it as a way to consolidate the masses behind a socialist religion of humanity, Lenin denounced the so-called "God-Building" heresy as an unnecessary and even dangerous mystification. He argued that no shared experience of an illusory phenomenon like religion could bind people as powerfully and authentically as shared class struggle and revolutionary consciousness.

At the same time that he denounced both religion as such and the "God-Builders'" proposals to use religion in the service of the revolution, Lenin nevertheless acknowledged and even envied religion's power over the popular imagination (Stites 1989; Luehrmann 2017, 232). As he worked to build up the Bolshevik Party before the revolution, his approach to religious affairs became increasingly pragmatic, even as his position remained ideologically intransigent. In "Socialism and religion" (1905), Lenin's most developed writing on the religious question, Lenin followed Marx in casting religion as "merely a product and reflection of the economic yoke within society," and described its danger as being in the passivity that it engendered among the working class. Religion was a "spiritual booze" that kept the proletariat from pursuing its emancipation through revolution (Lenin 1969, 43). Lenin made a distinction between the state's and the party's position on religion. Whereas the state was to be indifferent on religion so long as religion remained a "private affair," the party – as a vanguard "association of class-conscious, advanced fighters for the emancipation of the working class" – had to take a firm position and could not be "indifferent to lack of class-consciousness, ignorance or obscurantism in the shape of religious beliefs" (Lenin 1969, 45). The party was to use "ideological weapons" and enlist science "in the battle against religion," but avoid repressive measures that could alienate the working class. As Lenin put it, "Unity in this really revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class for the creation of a paradise on earth is more important to us than unity of proletarian opinion on paradise in heaven."[1]

Before the revolution, Lenin's faith in the Marxist theory of history led him to see religion as a problem with a solution, and even to look at it from a position of strength. He believed in the Marxist telos whereby religion would simply die out with the transformation of economic and political relations, "swept up as rubbish by the very course of economic development" (Lenin 1969, 46). After the revolution – once Lenin became the head of the new revolutionary state and not just its main ideologist (Smirnov 2013, 292) – the social and political realities on the ground tested this faith.

Religion and Atheism under Soviet Power: Legal Framework

Based on these assumptions, one of the Bolshevik Party's first priorities when it gained power in 1917 was to neutralize the political power of religious

1 Indeed, in his article "Liberals and clericals" (1912), Lenin was even open to the participation of the clergy in public life, writing, "We are not afraid of clericalism, we will happily debate with them on a platform that is free and equal for everyone."

institutions, and the most powerful religious institution under Soviet power in particular: the Russian Orthodox Church. In the first years of Soviet power, when the party's position was precarious and the survival of the revolution was at stake, the Bolsheviks saw religion primarily as a political problem to be tackled through legal and administrative measures. Almost immediately, the new government passed a series of decrees to establish Bolshevik control over the central institutions of the modern state: the bureaucracy, law, and education (Smolkin 2018, ch. 1). In December 1917, the party nationalized all monastic and church lands and created a secular bureaucracy to register acts of civil status, such as birth, marriage, and death – a function that before the revolution had been under the purview of religious institutions (Werth 2006). In January 1918, they issued a decree "On the Separation of the Church from the State and the School from the Church," which deprived the church of standing as a legal entity and brought all education under the oversight of the newly established Commissariat of Enlightenment (*Narkompros*) (Holmes 1991; Peris 1998, 25). At this point, the Bolsheviks were less concerned with individual piety than with the secularization of the state, and especially the removal of religion from politics and public life. Indeed, the 1918 Constitution guaranteed the citizens "freedom of conscience," defined as the right to fulfill liturgical "needs" – a right that, de jure, remained constitutionally protected for the rest of the Soviet period.

Yet, over the course of the 1920s, popular resistance to Bolshevik policies and the continued influence of the clergy in local communities made clear that religion remained a significant social force (Young 1997; Husband 2000). Thus, even after Metropolitan Sergii declared the loyalty of the Orthodox Church to Soviet power in 1926, they continued to see religion as a social force capable of fomenting counter-revolution, and therefore a political threat. Indeed, in the first two decades of Soviet power, the Bolsheviks treated powerful religious institutions, and especially the majority faith, as allies of the old regime, and for this reason focused anti-religious activity primarily on Russian Orthodoxy. However, religious minorities – such as Baptists, Orthodox dissenters, and Jews and Muslims – were understood as victims of tsarist oppression, and therefore initially treated as potential allies (Keller 2001; Coleman 2005; Bemporad 2013). The Bolsheviks were especially reluctant to pursue radical anti-religious measures in the borderlands, where religious and ethnic identities were often interwoven, because they feared that attacking local religious authorities and traditional customs and norms would fuel separatist movements. Instead, they forged political alliances with reformers *within* traditional religious institutions – such as the so-called "red

priests" within the Orthodox Church (Roslof 2002), and the *Jadidis*, who initially supported Soviet power in the Muslim regions of Central Asia (Khalid 2014; Tasar 2017) – with the goal of sowing confessional discord and establishing valuable alliances.

In 1929, the Soviet state issued a new law on religious associations that was intended to definitively undermine religion's social influence and remove it from public life. With the new law, which remained in force until the end of the Soviet period, religion was prohibited not just in state institutions and schools, but also from activities like charity, social outreach, and the religious education of minors. This also outlawed many popular religious practices like pilgrimages, visits to sacred sites, and indigenous outdoor worship (Luehrmann 2011; Quijada 2019). In effect, religious activity was limited to liturgical practice within the walls of the church. Soviet law protected citizens' right to religious belief and limited forms of practice, but it also protected the right to conduct atheist propaganda – a right that the Bolshevik Party construed as a duty for party members, as outlined in the party charter.

Atheism thus occupied a privileged place in the Soviet system, but never became hegemonic. On the one hand, it was written into the official ideology of Soviet Communism and supported by the party in power. On the other hand, religious activity remained legal and continued to exist, albeit subject to state regulation, including administrative restrictions as well as harassment and violence. The USSR thus attempted to navigate the boundary between a state that guaranteed secular norms like religious freedom and a party that rejected these same norms for its own members and professed a commitment to spreading atheism. This contradiction became especially visible after Stalin's rapprochement with religion during World War II (Shkarovskii 1999; Chumachenko 2002). Atheism thus had a privileged status in a plurality of legally permitted worldviews, similar to the status held by Orthodox Christianity under the tsars. The social costs of religion, however, remained high. Religiosity, though possible within recognized settings, times, and places, carried clear costs and dangers, since to be known as a religious believer could have negative repercussions on the educational opportunities and professional prospects of a Soviet citizen. Needless to say, there were no such costs or dangers associated with atheism, and no limitations to its public profession or propagation. While religion was marginalized, atheism was given access to educational, media, and cultural institutions; Soviet people would encounter it in schools and universities, on the pages of newspapers and books, and during organized events in their

workplaces and neighborhoods. Religion was marked as the other, while atheism became the unmarked norm (Smolkin 2018, 55–6).

Militant Atheism: Anti-religious Enthusiasm (1920s to 1930s)

Emblematic of the Bolshevik understanding of and approach to religion and atheism in the first years after the revolution is the famous pamphlet, "The ABC of Communism," by party theorists Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii. Published in 1919, shortly after the issuing of the new Second [Bolshevik] Party Program at the Eighth Party Congress (1918–19), the pamphlet's task was to popularize for the masses the party's position on various issues of importance, including religion. The new party program – the first issued in the context of Communism in power – stated that the simple "bourgeois democratic" separation of religion from the state was unacceptable to the party. Though the authors presented religious knowledge and authority as inevitably succumbing to the pressure of socialist construction and scientific enlightenment, they also argued that Communism required of party members a more engaged approach. For Communists, the fight against religion had to occur on two fronts: against the entrenched power of the church, which was "materially influenced in the maintenance of popular ignorance," and against the "widely diffused and deeply ingrained prejudices" of the masses. To "slowly but surely undermine the authority of religion," the party had to organize "the widest possible scientific, education, and anti-religious propaganda," hold lectures and debates, publish literature, and disseminate scientific knowledge, and do all of this without offending believers (Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii 1925). Initially, then, the party tried to navigate an ambiguous line between its aggressive anticlerical position and its recognition of enlightenment measures as the best way to bring the masses to atheism. We can see the lack of clear direction in the fact that the first Soviet anti-religious journal, *Revolution and Church*, appeared in 1919, but even then only came out sporadically, and focused on religious affairs rather than on atheism as such. Organized atheist propaganda only began in 1922, when several pivotal developments led to a more militant phase in the party's approach to Soviet atheism.

The first sign of atheism's "militant" turn came in February 1922, when the party initiated a campaign to expropriate church valuables. Framed as a humanitarian response to the disastrous famine brought on by Bolshevik grain requisition policies over the course of the Civil War (1918–21), the party

pressured the Orthodox Church to donate religious objects to raise money for famine relief. When the church tried to claim some agency over the process, the party began expropriations by force, oftentimes resorting to arbitrary arrests and even executions. In many places, Bolshevik expropriations were also accompanied by propaganda campaigns, such as the campaign to "expose" saints' relics and miracle-working icons as deliberate falsifications by "church people" that sought to take advantage of popular ignorance (Smith 2009; Greene 2010; MacKay 2013), or atheist "carnivals," such as anti-Easter, which mocked religious holidays and practices. For example, during the 1922–3 Christmas season, Communist youth visited houses with atheist "carols" and organized demonstrations of anti-religious films and skits (Husband 2000, 58). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Bolshevik strategy of seizing sacred objects, persecuting religious authorities, and mocking religious culture encountered significant local resistance, including instances of popular violence.

Popular resistance to Bolshevik policies on the ground revealed the considerable power of religion to still mobilize opposition to Soviet power, which for Lenin was an intolerable state of affairs. In response, the party put aside the secular framework that had informed religious policy since the revolution and reaffirmed its commitment to building an atheist society. In March 1922, Lenin composed "On the meaning of militant materialism" – an essay that is regarded as his "philosophical testament" (Smirnov 2013) – in which he pointed to the dangers posed to the revolution by the clergy and religion's bourgeois intelligentsia apologists, and called on party members to "expose and indict" these "overeducated lackeys of clericalism." The stakes were nothing less than the liberation of the masses, those "millions" condemned to "darkness, ignorance, and superstition." Lenin argued that militant materialism, "varied atheist propaganda" in the form of atheist literature or scientific enlightenment, was the party's best weapon to wake the masses from their "religious slumber." In a secret letter sent to the Bolshevik Politburo on 19 March 1922, Lenin put it more bluntly, declaring a "ruthless battle" against the "representatives of the reactionary clergy and reactionary bourgeoisie," and calling for the "ruthless" elimination of these elements in Soviet society. In May 1922, the Bolsheviks arrested Patriarch Tikhon of the Orthodox Church.

With the Bolshevik Party's new approach to religion, communicated both through theoretical publications that articulated the correct Leninist position and policies that punished those who challenged the party line, Soviet power began to create new atheist institutions. In 1922, we see the establishment of

the Anti-religious Commission within the party's "Agitprop" department, as well as the founding of the atheist journal *Godless* [Bezbozhnik], run by Emeliian Iaroslavskii, a Bolshevik theorist of pre-revolutionary pedigree who became the godfather of "militant atheism," and who, in that same year, published the first major atheist propaganda book, the *Bible for Believers and Unbelievers*. In 1925, Iaroslavskii became the head of the new League of Militant Godless (henceforth LMG), a social organization charged by the party with producing and disseminating atheist propaganda (Peris 1998). Yet, even with the party's turn to a more radical atheism, the meaning and parameters of "militant atheism" still had to be worked out. Emblematic of this is the conflict that arose between Iaroslavskii's journal *Godless* and a second atheist journal that had been created shortly after, *Godless at the Lathe* [Bezbozhnik u stanka]. While *Godless* sought to appeal to believers through propaganda that relied on reason and persuasion, *Godless at the Lathe* advocated for a more militant approach, casting the church and believers as implacable enemies and calling for violent action. It is worth noting that initially, when these two positions clashed in 1926, the party supported the more moderate approach, suggesting that pragmatic calculation, rather than ideological fanaticism, were guiding policy, as well as the lack of confidence and even incoherence of the atheist project in the early Soviet period (Peris 1998; Tesar 2019, 45–7). The moderate approach, however, did not last long. With Stalin's "Great Break," which initiated the crash modernization campaign known as the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32), atheism was mobilized in the service of one of the plan's central goals: cultural revolution.

With the onset of the First Five-Year Plan, the Bolsheviks again framed religion as a political threat rather than a "vestige" of the old social order, and called for the LMG to declare its own "Godless Five-Year Plan" that would, like the state's crash industrialization and collectivization projects, overcome centuries of (religious) backwardness and propel the USSR into the (atheist) future. The "militant atheism" of the Stalinist 1930s had multiple components, and intensified many of the policies that had been introduced during the 1920s, including administrative regulation and repression, education and scientific enlightenment, and cultural reforms. The press published anti-religious articles with greater frequency and vitriol; enthusiasts in party, Komsomol, and LMG organizations planned carnivalesque campaigns around religious holidays, and even tried to replace religious life cycle rituals – especially those associated with birth, marriage, and death – with socialist life cycle rites like "red" baptisms, weddings, and funerals (Stites 1989; Von Geldern 1993; Peris 1998; Husband 2000; Rolf 2014; Smolkin 2018, ch. 6).

Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, we also see the construction of spaces marked as distinctly anti-religious and atheist, such as the anti-religious museum, planetarium, and crematorium, as well as spaces that became contested sites, such as churches and cemeteries (Smolkin 2018). While the planetarium and crematorium (both built in Moscow) were novel and future-oriented institutions that positioned themselves in the service of scientific and technological progress, and in this sense functioned to sacralize atheism, anti-religious museums and cemeteries relied on a different principle, occupying former religious spaces in order to desacralize religion and endow the spaces with new secular and atheist meaning (Smolkin-Rothrock 2011; Luehrmann 2017). But in a context where the influence of religious institutions remained significant while Soviet power was still insecure, atheism remained above all an anticlerical project – something that especially stands out in the visual propaganda of the time, which overwhelmingly relies on negative and comic depictions of clergy from different confessions to convey the atheist message (Brown 2019).

Finally, alongside anticlerical measures and militant atheist propaganda, there were also efforts to approach religion "scientifically," and, over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, we can see the emergence of a distinct Soviet way of thinking about both religion and atheism. It is worth noting that in the early Soviet period, the study of religion, on the one hand, and atheist propaganda, on the other, were still seen as two distinct projects. While atheist propaganda was conducted by social organizations, such as the LMG, the Komsomol, and party propaganda departments, the study of religion was still taking place in universities and academic institutes within the disciplines of history, ethnography, folklore, and sociology. Over the course of the 1930s, however, this distinction between religious studies and atheist propaganda began to disappear. The "scientific" study of religion increasingly needed to fall within Marxism's theoretical and methodological parameters. Indeed, in 1922, the Bolsheviks dismissed all non-Marxist professors from their academic positions and even exiled prominent scholars of religion, like Nikolai Berdyaev, sending them abroad on the so-called "philosophers' ship," and bringing to an end academic debates that fell outside the parameters of class analysis (Thrower 1983). Religion came to be studied within institutions like the All-Union Society of Militant Dialectical Materialists, which was founded in 1928, and in 1930 established an anti-religious section (with similar sections founded across Soviet academic, cultural, and ideological organizations during the 1930s).

World War II was a major turning point in Soviet religious affairs, which also had an effect on the status and position of atheism. The Nazi invasion tested the capacity of the Soviet state to withstand a powerful and implacable enemy. It also tested the capacity of the party and its ideology to mobilize the population behind Soviet power. In this critical context, Stalin turned to religious institutions to help bolster social support for the Soviet war effort. Clergy were released from the camps and returned to parishes that were being reopened. Some even assumed the role of chaplains, blessing the troops headed to the front (Shkarovskii 1995; Chumachenko 2002; Khalid 2014). Over the course of the next several years, the state established a special bureaucratic organ to oversee religious affairs, reopened many local religious organizations that had been closed during the 1930s, and reopened religious educational institutions like seminaries and medrese, which allowed religious organizations to train a new generation of clergy, albeit in a limited capacity (Khalid 2014; Kenworthy 2012).

By the end of the early Soviet period, atheist knowledge production was taking place within institutions that performed a specifically Soviet function: using social science to achieve ideological goals. With regard to Soviet atheism, this meant two things: first, trying to understand religion with the goal of coming up with more effective anti-religious strategies (a "negative" function); and second, producing a distinct atheist knowledge and coherent atheist culture (a "positive" function). As far as attention and resources were concerned, the party undoubtedly devoted more of both to the "negative" work of atheism, whereas atheism's "positive" meaning remained within the purview of the LMG, the primary site of "atheist thinking" and the first and only mass organization where "atheist knowledge could be discussed" (Tesar 2019, 41). By the early 1940s, the party's "negative" approach to atheism had yielded results: religion had been largely excised from Soviet public life and the political power of religious institutions was neutralized – so much so that, during World War II, Stalin changed his approach to religious affairs and brought religious institutions back into Soviet life under the purview of the state.[2] However, atheism's "positive" mission – the creation of an atheist society – lagged far behind, with atheism remaining "a concept associated

2 This was especially the case with the Russian Orthodox Church, which saw its Patriarchate restored by the leader of the same Soviet state that had dismantled it earlier. In this new context, however, even those religious institutions that were legally sanctioned by the state had no autonomy over their own affairs, operating under the supervision of two government bureaucracies charged with their supervision: the Council on the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults.

with the denial of religion but with an unclear positive content" (Tesar 2019, 49). In the context of the war, militant atheism came to be seen as an unnecessary social disturbance, and atheist institutions, including the LMG and its publications, were disbanded (Peris 1998; Smolkin 2018). Following the Soviet victory in 1945, the USSR entered a period of relative calm in religious affairs that lasted until Stalin's death in 1953.

Scientific Atheism: Enlightenment and Worldview (mid-1950s to late 1960s)

The term "scientific atheism" was not used in the early Soviet period and did not appear in canonical Marxist or Marxist–Leninist texts. Whereas there were "scientific" studies of religion and materialist philosophy that drew atheist conclusions, atheist work as such was firmly embedded in the framework of propaganda. Atheism was connected with science inasmuch as it referenced scientific knowledge and the history of science in anti-religious work – for instance, peppering astronomy lectures at the Moscow Planetarium, the country's new "theater of scientific enlightenment," with discussions of church persecutions of Galileo and Giordano Bruno, or connecting new findings in astronomy with claims about the non-existence of God. But atheism itself was not considered a science. Its genealogy was not so much in philosophy, even in its Marxist guise, but in the sphere of ideology and propaganda, in which theoretical concepts necessarily had to have a political and social application (Kenez 1985; Brandenberger 2011). In this sense, "scientific atheism" – as a term, discipline, and sphere of ideological work – was deeply indebted to and embedded in its specific historical context. It appeared in Soviet life when, following Stalin's death and the subsequent rise to power of Nikita Khrushchev, a new approach to religion and atheism became necessary.[3]

"Scientific atheism" entered Soviet discourse in 1954, when the Communist Party reignited its campaign against religion following an almost twenty-year hiatus. While "overcoming" religion had always been considered essential to the successful construction of Communism, the party had largely given up on the militant atheist approaches of the early Soviet period, seeing them as ineffective and even counter-productive to the goal of consolidating Soviet power and forging an atheist society. Instead, Stalin forged a rapprochement

3 Its closest disciplinary relative was "scientific Communism," which came into existence at the same time.

with religion and cast atheism aside indefinitely. When Khrushchev came to power, therefore, his broader denunciation of Stalinism included a criticism of the more pragmatic approach to religious affairs that had come to be associated with Stalin. Khrushchev characterized the previous approach as a departure from Marxism–Leninism and the original mission of the revolution and called for a return to ideological purity. To emphasize the start of a new era, he declared that the Soviet Union had entered a new historical stage: "Building Communism."

Since religion could not continue to exist under Communism, the fact that it remained a part of Soviet life decades after the revolution now needed to be addressed. Religion again became a problem, and atheism a priority. However, religion was no longer defined as a primarily political problem. Since the state's wartime rapprochement with religion, religious institutions and believers who existed within the parameters allowed by the state were now considered "patriotic" citizens rather than political enemies. In this context, the goal of atheist work was no longer to expose and denounce believers, but to help believers overcome their own backward worldviews. This made religion into an ideological problem. As an alien ideology inside the USSR that had the power to corrupt Soviet minds and thwart progress toward Communism, religion needed to be "overcome" in order to bring Soviet society to Communist consciousness. And since the primary site of the battle against religion was no longer with enemy believers but with backward worldviews, the militant atheism of the early Soviet period was discarded in favor of scientific atheism (Stone 2008; Smolkin 2018, chs. 2 and 3).

Under Khrushchev, Soviet atheist approaches remained multi-pronged, involving state efforts to regulate religious institutions to diminish their social influence (closing churches, deregistering religious communities, and further restricting the ability of the clergy to carry out their work), and party efforts to propagate scientific materialism and inculcate atheist worldviews (bringing atheism more centrally into education, culture, and propaganda work). But over the course of the Khrushchev era, the emphasis shifted increasingly from the "negative" anticlerical approach to the "positive" enlightenment model. This shift, however, required some effort considering the fact that atheist institutions and cadres had been demobilized during the war. Indeed, inasmuch as atheism existed at all in the late Stalin period, it was in the very limited context of the Museum of the History of Religion in Leningrad, the only anti-religious museum to reopen after the war, and within the parameters of the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific

Knowledge (known as the "Knowledge" Society), which had been founded in 1947 and served as the country's main popular enlightenment organization.

Initially, atheism was not foregrounded in the Society's work. After the LMG was disbanded in 1943, it was never replaced by another institution dedicated to atheism, and atheist work instead became part of the broader enlightenment project (Frogatt 2006; Luehrmann 2011; Andrews 2016). The Knowledge Society served as a voluntary association of enthusiasts (typically intellectuals and professionals in law, medicine, and education) who lectured to popular audiences on a variety of topics, from international affairs and political economy; hygiene and family planning; literature and art; and scientific disciplines like chemistry, biology, and astronomy. Atheism, as a lecture topic, was folded into the last category. This decision accorded with one of the goals of the revived anti-religious campaign, which was to avoid association with the crude anticlerical "militant atheism" of the early Soviet period – what the new generation of atheist specialists referred to as "vulgar atheism." Instead, "scientific atheism" would produce the desired scientific materialist worldview by showing how "the superiority of science" superseded ignorance and backwardness and made divine explanations and interventions "obsolete" (Luehrmann 2011, 237; Frogatt 2006; Smolkin 2018, chs. 3 and 4). To this end, scientific atheism was introduced into education, with Departments of Scientific Atheism being established at major universities, and a course, "Foundations of Scientific Atheism," introduced into higher education as an elective in 1959, and made into a requirement in 1964. Scientific atheism was also spread through numerous other channels, including the press, continuing education courses, libraries and book clubs, planetarium visits and lectures, and even a campaign to introduce new secular holidays and rituals to replace their religious counterparts and infuse the Soviet calendar with its own festive ritual culture (Lane 1981; Luehrmann 2011; Rolf 2014; Smolkin 2018).

But what distinguished the new "scientific atheism" from its militant predecessor, and what exactly made it "scientific"? First, the fact that it constituted a fundamental part of Marxist materialism: Soviet atheism was scientific by virtue of its belonging to the Marxist worldview. But second, and more significant, Soviet atheism was scientific because it relied on scientific enlightenment in a much more prominent way. Coinciding with the so-called Scientific-Technological Revolution of the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, which included scientific and technological breakthroughs in space exploration and human space travel, it is unsurprising that the Soviet ideological establishment relied heavily on the cosmic enthusiasm of Soviet society to communicate the

message that heaven is empty. This appeal to "scientific" discourse allowed atheism to shed its atheist "militancy" and gave it access to the "objectivity" of science. But it did something more, allowing it to tap into the charisma of scientific technological progress and human space travel, which – given breath-taking Soviet breakthroughs in the conquest of the cosmos – seemed miraculous (Andrews and Siddiqi 2011; Smolkin-Rothrock 2011; Smolkin 2018, ch. 3).

Ultimately, the results of the Khrushchev-era anti-religious campaign were mixed. By 1964, more than half the country's religious spaces had been closed, and the Soviet people's enthusiasm for Soviet space conquest suggested that they embraced scientific enlightenment. Yet, as atheists learned when they began to survey Soviet society, closing churches did not bring the expected decline in religious rites or church revenue, and scientific enlightenment did not necessarily produce atheist worldviews (Stone 2008; Smolkin 2018). For Soviet atheists, the lesson of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign was that many Soviet people had little trouble reconciling science and religion, or (un)belief with (religious) practice. Moreover, many continued to rely on religion for moral norms, connection to tradition, communal identity, aesthetic experience, and to solemnify and officiate important rites of passage. Religion, then, continued to shape communities, families, and individuals. And since religion persisted, even in socioeconomic conditions that were supposed to be inhospitable to it, Soviet atheists turned to the social sciences to figure out why (Luehrmann 2015a; Smolkin 2018). As it became apparent that religion was not succumbing to the Marxist laws of historical development, atheists had to assume a new role and become not just propaganda cadres but social scientists as well.

Social Scientific Atheism: The Search for a Secular Society and the Turn to Positive Atheism (Late 1960s to 1980s)

At the end of the Khrushchev era, the party mobilized disciplines like sociology and ethnography to study religion and secularization in Soviet society, and – with the challenges and lessons of the Khrushchev-era anti-religious campaign behind it – formed an institution charged with the production and management of atheist theory and practice: the Institute of Scientific Atheism. Founded in 1964 by party decree, the Institute was established within the Academy of Social Sciences, the "think tank" that managed Soviet ideological production, which in turn was under the Soviet

Communist Party's Central Committee, which dictated its mission and curated its activity (assisted behind the scenes by the security apparatus).

Over the course of the late Soviet period, the atheist apparatus, led by the Institute, conducted hundreds of studies of religion and atheism in Soviet society (Luehrmann 2015a, ch. 3; Smolkin 2018, ch. 5). It noted several trends that troubled the Marxist narrative. First, statistics showed that, after the tumultuous period of the anti-religious campaign, religiosity in the Brezhnev era held steady at around 20–30 percent in the Orthodox Christian regions of the country, and closer to 50 percent in the Muslim regions. Second, there were notable demographic changes in the social profile of the Soviet believer: Whereas the operating assumption had been that religion was the purview of the elderly, the uneducated, and predominantly women, sociological surveys showed that the proportion of men was increasing and that the average believer was also becoming younger and more educated. Third, rather than being confined to specific spaces and texts (which could be regulated and disciplined by church and state authorities), popular religiosity was often undisciplined and "domesticated" (Dragadze 1993), which put it beyond the state's reach. Finally, Soviet religious expression included not only a turn toward traditional religious institutions but also to alternative forms of spirituality and new religious movements (Panchenko 2011; Menzel et al., 2012).[4] Overall, then, Soviet social scientific studies of religion revealed a complex ideological landscape and showed atheists the limitations of their existing definitions and approaches to religion.

As atheism was theorized and applied on a mass scale, its goals and methods changed: While initially success was measured by decline in religiosity, by the late 1960s spiritual indifference now emerged as a central concern (Smolkin 2018, ch. 5). Indeed, indifference, as a distinct worldview position, was the most significant and surprising development that atheists discovered when they began to study Soviet society. For Soviet atheists, the fact of indifference came to be more unsettling than the fact of the continued existence of religion. Whereas believers could be

4 During the Brezhnev era, Soviet power had an implicit social contract with religious institutions and believers. Those that followed Soviet law remained above ground; the parameters of the religious experiences available to them in these conditions were certainly more narrow, which likely diminished the quality of religious experience, but they could expect a relatively undisturbed existence. Those who pushed against the boundaries permitted by the state found themselves subject to administrative measures, harassment, and repression, with the unsurprising result that many who expressed dissent ended up in the religious underground (Boobbyer 2005; Beglov 2008; Baran 2014).

engaged and converted, those who were indifferent had no interest in the questions at the heart of religion or atheism. They were disengaged from religious or ideological truth claims, and they were unconcerned if their actions did not accord with their convictions, since they ostensibly lacked firm convictions to begin with.

What the party saw when it looked at indifference was that it was losing its grasp on Soviet society. That indifference was especially prevalent among Soviet youth only underscored the danger it posed for Soviet Communism, since it meant that the Communist system of values was not being reproduced in the next generation. For the party, this made the production of positive atheist conviction imperative. It was no longer enough to create a "society free of religion"; the ideological objective now was to create a society of convinced atheists. Soviet atheists were different from their atheist counterparts elsewhere in that they were self-conscious proponents of a dominant ideology, but their use of social scientific methods to show how the absence of religion impacts society makes their work valuable beyond the Soviet context. While their concerns were far more pragmatic than those of most twenty-first-century researchers of belief and non-belief, the questions they asked foreshadowed those of some contemporary research on multi-generational processes of secularization.

The experiences of "militant" and "scientific" atheism, coupled with the lessons learned from the social scientific study of religion and secularization in Soviet society, forced the Soviet ideological establishment to re-evaluate atheism's goals. As a result, in the final decades of Soviet power, Soviet atheism took two significant turns. The first was a turn to religious studies that embraced the theoretical and methodological components of atheist work – namely, the social scientific study of religion – while eschewing its practical and propagandistic elements. The second was a turn to a search for a program of positive atheism that could effectively inculcate "atheist conviction," since it was atheist conviction that was supposed to secure the Soviet people's ideological commitment to Soviet Communism. But both of these turns depended on religion as a foundation and a point of reference: While the first sought to understand religion, the second sought to replace it. Over the course of its history, then, Soviet atheism developed in conversation with religion in theory and through the direct engagement with religion in practice. It was through these engagements that the contours, contradictions, and lessons of Soviet atheism became apparent.

Conclusion

Most discussions of atheism – even those that discuss atheism in its Marxist guise – sidestep or altogether avoid the Soviet case. One reason for this may be as a reaction to the Cold War framing of "godless Communism" as a totalitarian atheist regime, which – if one subscribes to the framing – does not leave much to inquire about behind the Iron Curtain. Another reason may be because the Soviet experiment with atheism, in which atheist theory was supposed to be transformed into atheist practice, was aborted and therefore remained unfinished. Indeed, there is no consensus on even the fundamental question of whether Soviet atheism succeeded or failed. Certainly, Soviet society became less religious, and perhaps even more secular (Luehrmann 2015b). But that did not mean that it became more atheist (Smolkin 2018, 2020). In this sense, Soviet atheism occupies a peculiar place in the broader history of secularization as a social process and of the secular as an epistemological category. As opposed to the western context, where atheism had no relationship with the state and where atheist inquiry was not constrained by ideological parameters, Soviet atheism depended on Soviet power both for its meaning and its existence. As such it constituted a distinct and shifting arena of theoretical inquiry and ideological practice.

Paradigmatic of both its peculiar position in the broader constellation of Soviet power and its challenge navigating the tension between theory and practice was Soviet atheism's persistent difficulty finding an institutional and disciplinary home, as we can see from the change in the primary site of atheist work – from atheist museums and the LMG under Lenin and Stalin, to the Knowledge Society and the planetarium under Khrushchev, to the Institute of Scientific Atheism of the Academy of Social Sciences in the late Soviet period. Indeed, it was arguably not until the late Soviet period, with the Institute of Scientific Atheism, that Soviet atheism found a home that fit more or less comfortably.

By the end of the Soviet period, the USSR had a developed infrastructure for managing religious affairs, a complex understanding of religion as a social and cultural phenomenon, and a developed atheist apparatus engaged with the theory and practice of Soviet atheism. But in 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev embarked on a major reform program that threw into question the ideological foundations of Soviet power, this system began to unravel. As religion began to return to Soviet public life, the country's main atheist institutions were either renamed, reformed, or disbanded. As with the

campaign to inculcate atheism into Soviet society, the effort to reform and revise atheism also began in the press. The Knowledge Society's flagship mass atheist journal, *Science and Religion*, which had been leading the charge on the atheist front since its founding in 1959, stopped writing on anti-religious and atheist themes and, after 1988, it mostly published spiritual and esoteric content (Kellner 2019). In an effort to keep up with the times, the Knowledge Society, after a series of long and arduous debates, changed the name of its atheist section to the section on "religious studies and free-thought." It also changed the name of its methodological periodical, *Scientific Atheism*, published since 1964, first to *Atheism and Religion: History and Modernity*, and then to *Culture and Religion* (dispensing with atheism in the title altogether). The society also began to publish a new periodical, *Question Mark*, which covered a broad range of "worldview" issues, from paranormal phenomena and UFOs to the meaning of life, death, and suffering. As the atheist apparatus continued to dissolve in the late 1980s, the Society lost control over the main institutions it had used to spread atheism, including the Moscow Planetarium and the Moscow House of Scientific Atheism, as well as the other forty houses of atheism it supervised across the USSR (Smolkin 2018, 237). Today, the Knowledge Society continues to exist under the same name, but its enlightenment mission now includes religious literacy. After the Soviet collapse, Departments of Scientific Atheism at universities and institutes became Departments of the Philosophy of Religion or Departments of Cultural Studies, and the Institute of Scientific Atheism of the Communist Party Central Committee's Academy of Social Sciences became the Department of State-Confessional Relations of the Russian Academy of State Service (RAGS) under the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation.

Since the decline and ultimate disintegration of Soviet Communism, religion has re-entered Russian politics and public life in a prominent way (Fagan 2013; Smolkin 2018). It has returned to education, with courses like "The Foundations of the Spiritual and Moral Culture of the Peoples of Russia" in school, and the introduction of theology as a discipline in universities. Chaplains have returned to assume an important role in prisons and the military, and most recently, the Ministry of Defense has built a "mega-church" that brings together religious, military, and patriotic themes. Following the Pussy Riot protest events of 2013, religion has even been introduced into Russian criminal law, with "offending the feelings of believers" now constituting a criminal offense. Atheism, on the other hand, has become separated from the state and is marginal to society. Given the

complex, dynamic, and public role of religion in contemporary Russian society and the relative marginality of atheism in Russian society today, the Soviet Communist supposition that religions would eventually "die out," giving way to the organic emergence of an atheist society, is both comic and tragic: comic, because Soviet atheism is a case study in how something can work in theory but not in practice; and tragic, because of the devastation wrought along the way to learning this lesson.

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Modern Germany[1]

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Viewed from the perspective of the global history of modern atheism, Germany stands out for its contribution to three distinct varieties: the theoretical atheism promulgated by philosophers and cultural critics between the late Enlightenment and the interwar period; the mass atheism that has grown with religious indifference since the late twentieth century; and the secularist atheism embedded within popular anticlerical movements between the middle of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth centuries. Whereas the first two varieties of atheism have been the subject of extensive study, the third has received less scrutiny. Yet, arguably secularist atheism had the greatest impact on the course of modern German religious and political history. In order to make this case, this chapter will summarize the histories of theoretical and mass atheism and then focus on the dynamics and developments of secularist atheism.

Germans made their clearest mark on the intellectual history of atheism between the late 1700s and the 1930s. Whereas early modern Dutch, English, and French freethinkers inserted atheism into the radical wing of the early Enlightenment, the spectre of atheism reappeared as a possible consequence of German idealism at the end of the eighteenth century. Looking back at Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the ironist Heinrich Heine compared its impact to the actions of Maximilian Robespierre. Whereas the latter had relieved a king of his head, Kant had effectively eliminated all the positive proofs of God. While Heine may have overstated Kant's

1 Sections of this chapter are based on Weir, T. H. 2016. 'Säkularismus (Freireligiöse, Freidenker, Monisten, Ethiker, Humanisten),' in Lucian Hölscher and Volkhard Krech (eds.) *Handbuch der Religionsgeschichte im deutschsprachigen Raum*, vol. 6/2. Paderborn: Schöningh, 189–218. The author gratefully acknowledges the permission of the editors. The author would also like to thank the AHRC for a fellowship that allowed completion of the research for this article: AH/J004146/1: Socialism and Secularism in Berlin 1890 to 1933.

contribution to philosophical atheism, Spinozism and pantheism certainly crept through German idealism. Johann Gottlieb Fichte was forced from his professorship in Jena in 1799 for his supposed atheism, and, despite the fact that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel posited Protestantism to be the pinnacle of religion, he treated theological concepts such as the Beyond as transitory phenomena that would be liquidated in the progressive development of the spirit (Link 2007, 63–79). In the 1830s and 1840s, Hegel's progeny embraced the radical potential of such dialectical movements. Monotheism was, according to Ludwig Feuerbach, but a steppingstone in the development of social self-consciousness that would end in an atheistic humanism. Karl Marx cut his philosophical teeth on Feuerbach's religious criticism, but later viewed religion as a phenomenon that would evaporate in the course of social revolution. Friedrich Nietzsche made atheism central to his critique of European civilization and its 'slave morality' and the Austrian Sigmund Freud interpreted monotheism within the evolution of social psychology. For French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were 'three masters of suspicion', who 'took the most radically contrary stance to the phenomenology of the sacred'. In other words, their atheism flowed directly into the critical hermeneutics of modernism (Ricoeur 1970, 35).

The second variety of atheism in which Germany has provided an important example may be called 'mass atheism'. According to leading German sociologists of religion, only in the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly in the time since the 1960s, did atheism and religious indifference become a 'mass phenomenon' in Germany. The secularization of society, they hypothesized, was the crucial condition that allowed personal identification with atheism to become publicly acceptable. This development is fully compatible with the trend in much of the rest of western Europe, where rates of traditional religious practice and membership have been dropping steadily for decades. Where the German case stands out is in the territory of former East Germany. As part of its overall aim of 'building socialism', the communist state had carried out a forced secularization of its population through the active suppression of church attendance. But unlike most other social reforms undertaken after 1949, this secularization was not reversed after 1989. While other former socialist countries, such as Romania, saw a 'return to religion', this was not the case in Eastern Germany, where non-belief became even more deeply entrenched (Wohlrab-Sahr et al. 2008, 127–39).[2]

2 See the introduction to Gärtner et al. (2003, 9–20).

Whereas in 1945 only 10 per cent of the East German population were not members of the Protestant or Catholic Churches, by the end of the twentieth century over 70 per cent had officially left the Churches, making it, alongside the Czech Republic, the most atheistic region of the world (Wohlrab-Sahr et al. 2008, 128).

A key challenge in the study of the 'mass atheism' of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been to characterize the balance between active atheists, who proclaim their non-belief, and those who simply cannot be bothered with religion anymore. Following a distinction made by philosopher Michael Martin, we can think of them as two different atheisms, a positive, committed atheism and a negative or indifferent atheism (Martin 2006, 1–8). Historians of atheism have tended to study historical figures who adhered to positive atheism, such as those intellectuals, often marginalized in the academic mainstream of their time, who contributed to the first variety of atheism discussed above. The indifferent atheists have been of little interest to intellectual historians, but they have been taken up by sociologists and described most recently as the 'nones'. One sociologist, Ulrich Oevermann, has proposed a theory to connect positive and negative atheism, making religious indifference the endpoint of a secularization process. Following individual biographies, Oevermann has argued that the religious individual commonly passes from a positive belief in a transcendent God to a positive belief in immanence without God. Only in a second transition does the individual become unconcerned with the question or God – that is, he or she becomes indifferent and thus fully secularized (Oevermann 1995).

There was another form of atheism, which I call 'secularist' or 'confessional' atheism. Its period of greatest impact stretched from the revolution of 1848 to the National Socialist takeover in 1933. It was a form of positive atheism but did not have much impact on the course of philosophy. Its field of action was in society, but it in no way reached as many citizens as the ongoing rise in unbelief that took off in the 1960s. In fact, at its height, the overwhelming majority of the German population remained affiliated with either the Catholic or Protestant Churches. By 1933, despite years of agitation by freethinkers and their political allies on the left, only 3 per cent of the population had turned their backs on the Christian Churches or Jewish congregations. Yet, despite the absence of noteworthy intellectuals in its ranks, and without amounting to more than a fraction of the population, this third variety of atheism arguably had the greatest impact on German history.

In this chapter I advance the argument that this form of atheism achieved its remarkable relevance in Germany because of the role it played within the social order and the mode of governing religion, both of which were strongly shaped by confessional dynamics. Atheism was able to play this role because it formed a constitutive part in a number of movements that combined advocacy of immanent worldviews with religious critique. These movements, which included Free Religion, freethought, monism, ethical culture, and humanism, organized at the vanguard of the processes of secularization and challenged the chief tenets of the Christian order in nineteenth-century Europe. All of them championed the separation of church and state, advocated the use of reason and modern science, and railed against the cultural influence of the state churches. Yet, these secularist movements were not fully secular. In important ways, organized secularism, and within it popular atheism, remained beholden to and shaped by the religious field in which they struggled. Just as Germany's official 'confessions' (i.e. Catholicism and Protestantism) were structured by constitutional arrangements, theological disputes, social milieus, and political parties, so too was secularism.

In short, atheism nestled within secularism, which was nestled in turn within the confessional system. This chapter examines each of these locations of atheism, before undertaking an event history of atheism in modern Germany.

Atheism in Secularism

Why draw a distinction between atheism and organized secularism? Is a term like 'atheist secularism' not redundant? This choice of terms needs to be justified. The term *secularism*, in fact, first emerged around 1851 in a dispute over atheism within the British freethought movement. The Owenite radical George Holyoake found that 'atheism' was too negative and proposed 'secularism' as an expression that could give fuller expression to their movement. 'Secularism', he wrote, 'is a development of freethinking, including its positive as well as its negative side. Secularists consider freethinking as a double protest – a protest against specific speculative error, and in favour of specific moral truth' (Holyoake 1854). Such a definition of secularism draws attention to two aspects of the freethought movements of Europe that can form the basis of our understanding. First, it reveals a quintessential quality of secularist movements, namely the combination of negative anticlericalism and the positive advocacy of a naturalist worldview. Second, atheism was only one worldview option within secularism. Others included forms of

pantheism, cosmism, or humanism. What they all shared in common was that they were monistic – that is, their adherents believed that the higher meaning of existence was rooted in an ultimate unity of all being, rather than in a dualistic split between spirit and body, or God and humanity. Atheists generally adhered to a materialistic version of monism that saw matter as foundational to culture and spirit. Idealistic monists, by contrast, saw the world as a materialization of spiritual force. Atheist secularism is thus a subset of organized secularism.

The tight linkage of positive worldview and negative anticlericalism was found in the manifestoes of all secularist associations, including those that explicitly identified themselves as atheist. On New Year's Day 1905, the inaugural issue of *Der Atheist*, the most important organ of socialist freethinkers, placed its negative goal of 'ruthless struggle against all efforts meant to obstruct the spiritual development of the people' alongside its positive goal of 'popular discussion of all developments in the realm of natural science, history of culture, art, etc., in order to strengthen joy in the beautiful and noble'.

Although not all secularists were atheists, atheism was essential to the emergence and development of modern secularism. The most significant starting points of German secularism were the rationalist wings of the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths. Rationalism had existed in these religious communities for decades, but around 1845 the most radical rationalists split off and formed autonomous organizations, eventually called the *Free Religious Congregations*. This institutional development was flanked by Feuerbach's critique of religion and a general shift from an idealistic to a materialistic monism (Weir 2012). Following the 'materialism controversy' of the 1850s, during which Ludwig Büchner and other science popularizers first provided a coherent atheistic philosophy for the broad public, many free religious congregations distanced themselves from any connection to Christianity. By the end of the 1860s, atheism was being openly invoked in efforts by a handful of radicals to push the free religious movement to a clear statement on scientific worldview. During the liberal atmosphere of the 1870s, Berlin's congregation, the largest and most radical in Germany, placed a sign on its cemetery with a provocative atheistic message:

> Make life here beautiful and good,
> There is no beyond, no resurrection

In 1877, the political winds began to turn against free religion and, when the police lodged a complaint against the cemetery sign, the congregation

decided to place a board over it (Harndt 1920, 35–6).[3] In order to drive home his position at a national meeting of the Free Religious in 1883, the Berlin preacher (now called 'speaker') announced that rather than saying the customary 'Adieu', he would leave the assembly with a 'sans Dieu!' (Weir 2014, 102).[4]

Each of the subsequent secularist movements was linked by bands of filiation to free religion. In 1881, Ludwig Büchner joined with the free religious publicist August Specht to launch Germany's freethought movement. Specht justified the development of freethought with the observation that the 'eggshells of religion still cling to Free Religion' (Weir 2014, 2). However, even leading freethinkers nearly always accompanied the act of negating religion with the affirmation of a new worldview. The freethought and free religious movements generally overlapped and between 1901 and 1921 the national umbrella organizations of each movement were chaired in personal union by the free religious preacher of Breslau, Gustav Tschirn (Simon-Ritz 1997).

In the late nineteenth century, one of the heroes of global secularism was biologist Ernst Haeckel, known as the 'German Darwin' for his advocacy of evolutionary theory. Unlike Darwin, however, Haeckel transformed evolutionary theory into a worldview by fusing it with monism and using it to fight the idea of a monotheistic god, which he referred to satirically as a 'gaseous vertebrate'. Haeckel declared monism a 'band between science and religion' in 1892 and founded the German Monist League in 1906 (Nöthlich et al. 2007).

Pitting a muscular, rational atheism against a continued adherence to religion was a rhetorical tactic in the internal differentiation of the various secularist movements. When socialist freethinkers split off from the German Freethought League in 1908, they pilloried their liberal, 'bourgeois' counterparts for 'wanting to replace the sermon of the priest with the lecture of the professor, transform church ceremonies into secular "hours of edification" in which one gets intoxicated on the platitudinous chatter of vulgar monism, this vogue of bourgeois enlightenment'. The 'proletarian' freethinkers, by contrast, sought 'to do away with the idea of God' (Der Zentral-Verband

3 The threat of atheism also played a key role in triggering an international schism in Free Masonry. When the French lodge Grande Orient allowed atheists to join and replaced the Bible with a blank book in 1877, lodges in the predominantly Protestant countries, including Germany, Scandinavia, Great Britain, and the United States, broke off fraternal relations. Subsequent efforts to found secularist lodges in Germany required the organizers to seek affiliation with the French Grande Orient. See Hoffmann (2000).

4 Police Protocol of 22 May 1883, Landesarchiv Berlin (hereafter LAB), A Pr. Br. Rep. 030, no 15045, unpag.

Deutscher Freidenker 1910, 3, 7, 8). For them, true monism had to include the overcoming of the dualism of class – that is, it meant the incorporation of Marxian social theory and class struggle. Yet, even these 'proletarian' Freethinkers did not attempt to describe Marxism alone as the sole essence of their worldview. Like their middle-class rivals, socialist freethinkers considered the propagation of scientific materialism to be the cornerstone of their positive message for the German public.

Secularism and Confession

By virtue of its central role in the history and internal dynamics of modern secularism, atheism was also constitutive in the formation and operation of the confessional system by which religion and secularism were governed in Germany between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. Following the lead of historian Olaf Blaschke, scholars have argued that during this period, Germany underwent a 'second confessional age', whereby competition between religions became key to the development of the modern state and partisan system. Similar to the widely described 'pillarization' of the Netherlands, most Germans came to belong to social-moral milieus in which religious identity was aligned with their participation in modern organizational life – from sports clubs to political parties (Blaschke 2000; Smith 2001).

The German term *Konfession* was also a key concept in constitutional law of that era. Originally an ecclesiastical term used for the creedal statements of Protestants, in the early nineteenth century legal scholars neutralized it and used it to describe and to govern religious communities in a single system (Hölscher 2007). Through a hierarchy of acknowledged confessions (Protestant and Catholic) and tolerated non-confessions (Protestant sects and Jews), the states allocated rights and privileges to citizens and to churches. Thus, between constitutional law and pillarized society, confession came to structure modern German politics.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term *Konfession* was generally applied only to the Catholic and Protestant Churches. However, if one modifies the notion of 'religious field', which according to Pierre Bourdieu is structured by the competition over religious goods, and looks instead at a confessional field, the term confession can also be applied to secularist atheists. The goods that defined the confessional field were citizenship rights, control over moral education in schools, access to state sinecures, state financial support in the form of church taxes, etc. Whereas atheists of the

first two varieties, the intellectuals and the religiously disinterested, generally did not enter in the struggle over these goods, secularist atheists did. They sought access to rights granted to state churches and at the same time sought their elimination. Thus, for example, many secularist groups campaigned to end religious instruction in the schools, while at the same time they petitioned the state for the right to offer alternative ethical instruction.[5]

A confessional field defined not by the formal definition of *Konfession*, but rather by all organizations competing over confessional goods takes into account the state-sanctioned monopoly enjoyed by the established orthodox confessions, while also accounting for the significant presence of structurally heterodox movements that sought access to these goods. If their push for inclusion was strong enough to exert a significant force in shaping the confessional field, then these groups might be considered heterodox 'confessions'. Historians advocating the inclusion of Jews as a 'third' confession are pushing in this direction. However, as argued elsewhere, if 'confessionalism' is a valid paradigm for analysing modern Germany, it must employ a quadriconfessional model that incorporates the various forms of secularism, including atheism (Weir 2014).

Such a model of the confessional field helps explain the wider social forces acting upon atheism, as well as the role of atheism in structuring the religious politics of modern Germany. Regarding the first point, it becomes clearer why the self-ascription 'atheist' was relatively infrequently used by atheist secularists. Essentially, only marginal organizations with few members announced their atheism by including that term in their names. During the Weimar era, there was an organization called the League of Atheists, which according to church reports had only a handful of members in Berlin.[6] In the late twentieth century, an organization appeared called the International Association of Confessionless and Atheists, which now occupies a small place in the secularist landscape of contemporary Germany. The confessional rationale for avoiding overemphasis on atheism was that it would foreclose the possibility that the secularist organizations could lay claim to the confessional goods doled out by the state. It also helps explain the decision of the Berlin free religious congregation in the 1870s to bow to police pressure and hide the atheistic sign; the congregation feared that it would lose the right to the cemetery, which was a highly prized possession that allowed them to provide a crucial 'confessional' service (proper burial) for the members of

5 This argument is given more fully in the introduction to Weir (2014).
6 Archiv des diakonischen Werkes.

their milieu. This incident was but one of the many cat-and-mouse games played between secularist organizations, state churches, and the police that show how secularist atheism tested the confessional system it was sequestered within. More radical expressions of atheism were a constant temptation, but were continually curbed.

The confessional field is a relation model, and atheism can only be seen as a structuring force within it, if it produced effects among other actors in the field. Rebekka Habermas has claimed that the secularists were numerically too insignificant to constitute a quasi-confession (Habermas 2019, 117). It is correct that the members of all secularist organizations probably never exceeded 150,000 prior to the spike in membership in proletarian freethought in the Weimar Republic. However, atheist secularism can be considered a confession because the other parties in the confessional conflict and the state treated it as such.

The ability of atheist secularism to shape the confessional field can be best demonstrated in the political realm. Atheism had been attractive to many liberals until the 1840s and 1850s, when in the course of the Revolution of 1848 and its aftermath, it became associated with lower-middle-class urban groups, who increasingly became tied to the socialist movement. Heinrich Heine had joked that he had once been an atheist, but that as soon as he observed that common craftsmen were beginning to discuss atheism in their 'dirty symposia', he dropped it (Heine 1887, 301). Liberals began to move away from their earlier avid support of scientific materialism precisely when their political hegemony was challenged by the rise of socialism. In 1877, Berlin's liberal establishment was rocked by the unexpected loss of run-off elections to the socialists. In the same year, pathologist and leading liberal politician Rudolf Virchow, who had previously rhapsodized about the replacement of religion with science, now sounded the alarm. He described Darwinism, particularly in the worldview form presented by Ernst Haeckel, as a political danger and asked fellow scientists to imagine 'how the theory of evolution presents itself today in the head of a socialist' (Virchow 1877, 7).

For a time, the rising socialist party made political hay with atheism. On the floor of the Reichstag, leading socialist August Bebel declared the necessary connection of republicanism, socialism, and atheism. However, when chancellor Otto von Bismarck pushed through measures to suppress the socialist party in 1878, Bebel became less enchanted with atheism (Prüfer 2002). From that point on, party leaders regularly rebuffed secularists in party congresses, letting them know that they were only tolerated dissenters. Unofficially, however, secularist atheists were given a privileged position in

the party culture. Whereas Christians were expected to keep their religious views private, atheism was widely accepted.

Atheist secularism played a significant role in the cultural formation of the socialist milieu. The SPD's education associations encouraged workers to read classics of the materialist-monist worldview, such as Ludwig Büchner's *Force and Matter* or Ernst Haeckel's *Riddle of the Universe*. Freethinkers reached thousands of young workers as wandering speakers, science popularizers, and authors of brochures. The biographies of leading twentieth-century socialists and communists attest to the importance of early formative experiences with secularism. One such case is Walter Ulbricht, who as leader of the German Communist Party became the founder of East Germany. At the outbreak of war in 1914 he was serving as a socialist youth functionary in Leipzig, and in preparation for that year's summer solstice, he explained 'how we want to organize these festivities as materialists' (Franck 2001, 44).

A further element that brought socialism and secularist atheism together was the analogous position within the confessional system. To the degree that they viewed the state churches as the religious underpinning of monarchy and capitalism, it was logical that socialists should leave the churches, which most high-ranking German socialists had done by 1914. Among the fourteen socialists elected to the Prussian Landtag prior to 1918, nine identified themselves as 'confessionless', 'dissidents', or 'free religious' (Mann 1988).

The organized forms of German and Austrian atheism had an international impact through emigration. Following the failure of the 1848 revolution, leading free religious figures sought refuge in the United States and United Kingdom, and there established congregations. Freethinkers of the 1890s, such as Hedwig Henrich-Wilhelmi, who Berlin police called the most 'fanatical devotee of the atheist creed' toured the United States and lectured in German. In many regions American freethought was dominated not by English-speaking followers of Thomas Paine, but by German and Czech immigrants (Rampelmann 2003, 241).

Judaism, Atheism, Anti-Semitism

At the start of World War I, Carl von Ossietzky, who went on to become the most famous antifascist journalist of the Weimar Republic, was called up for service. His wife later recounted the scene at his mustering:

> First the Catholics had to take the oath on the flag, then the recruits of the Protestant faith. Carl did not step forward with the one or the other. He was a Freethinker. He waited to see what the major would do with him and the other likeminded. Then came the command 'Freethinkers, atheists, sectarians, godless – step forward!' Carl was the only one who stepped forward. The major regarded him from head to toe with a withering look – how could a recruit not recognize the official churches: 'You godless swine, the oath also applies to you!' (von Ossietzky 1966, 47–8)

This anecdote reveals the conflation of various forms of religious dissent with atheism in the confessional system. Yet, one type of religious minority was missing from Ossietzky's list: Jews. They appear in a similar anecdote told more than once by secular Jews in imperial Germany. In one such telling, that of the freethinker Waldeck Manasse, an army recruit announces himself to be a dissident at mustering and is told by his commanding officer: 'if you don't come up with a proper religion by tomorrow morning, I'll have to stick you with the Jews!' (Manasse 1910, 6).

The humour of this punchline lies not in the obvious nonsense of equating Judaism and atheism, but in the knowledge that conservatives, Christians, and the state authorities were making just such an equation based on the analogous position both held in the confessional system. In the eyes of the representative of the state, the emancipation of German Jews and the granting of full rights to atheists both posed a threat to a state that conceived of itself as Christian. This was the key argument brought by Protestant jurist Friedrich Julius Stahl, himself a converted Jew, who in the 1840s insisted that the Prussian state had to deny full rights to Jews or dissidents. Otherwise it would rob the Christian state of its role as an agent of divine providence. Stahl did not blame Jews for their confessional proximity to atheists, but later theologians did take a further step and argued that there was a deeper connection between Judaism and atheism. Particularly influential in this regard was Prussian court preacher Adolf Stoecker, who in March 1875 claimed that the anticlericalism and atheism then threatening German culture were products of the disintegration of the Jewish religion. It was, he declared, 'a judgment of God that a nation that God chose to be the guardian of religion is attempting to cheat Christians of their religion. Do not let yourselves be fooled by the remains of religion' that Jews manifested in their maintenance of the Sabbath, '[t]he division of belief and unbelief is also splitting the ranks of Israel.' But, whereas Christianity was still withstanding the onslaught, Stoecker believed that Judaism had already succumbed to unbelief (von Oertzen 1910, 130–1). A decade later, in April 1885, he gave

a well-attended speech, 'Semite, Atheist and Social Democrat', in which he restated his appreciation for 'Old Testament Judaism', as against 'modern' Judaism. 'Semite and atheist', he claimed, had 'recently gained in affinity' and 'such a Jewry, which wants atheism, must be fought by us to the death [*auf Tod und Leben*]' (Police report of 28 April 1885, 26).

Discrimination by the Christian state made Jews, atheists, and other dissenters into possible allies. Then, and until today, representatives of these groups have challenged discrimination contained in the remnants of the Christian hegemony over western societies, making them into motors of religious freedom (Walter 2005). However, anti-Semites proposed that underneath the structural overlap of their positions in the confessional system, there was an internal, quasi-theological connection between Judaism and atheism. This led to paradoxical formulations, such as that made by the leading Lutheran theologian and National Socialist Immanuel Hirsch in 1934, who opined that Bolshevism might one day 'even be designated an unbelieving aberration of the Jewish religion' (Hirsch 1934, 24).

A Brief History of Twentieth-Century Atheist Secularism

The decade after 1900 was a period of intensive activity among German secularists. Monism was one watchword of the period, and new monist organizations were launched in 1900 with the Giordano Bruno-Bund for Unified Worldview in Berlin and in 1906 with the German Monist League in Jena. The intellectual influence of monism can be traced via sexual reformers, such as Helene Stoecker and Magnus Hirschfeld, and cultural figures such as Isadora Duncan. The Monist League was guided by a heady technocratic optimism and its leaders declared in 1913 that monism 'was not only a method of thought and life but also a cultural aspiration', hence it would 'not [limit] itself to natural science and natural philosophy – the basis of our worldview', but would 'systematically [attempt] to incorporate one realm of life after another into its work' (*Das monistische Jahrhundert* 1913, 13).

The League had been founded in a political climate shaped by the impact of the French Law of Separation, debate over a new school law, and the Kulturkampf atmosphere engendered by the 1907 Reichstag election, which featured a vitriolic anti-Catholic and anti-socialist campaign by the chancellor. At that time, the Monist League had focused its agitation on the Catholic Church. The political winds shifted in July 1909, when the government collapsed and the new chancellor formed a coalition of conservative and

Catholic parties. This made political alliances possible between socialists and left-wing liberals and fostered an atmosphere conducive to secularist agitation.

The Monist League followed the leftward turn of 1909. A public debate sponsored by the League in Berlin in 1910 on the question 'Did Jesus live?' signalled a shift from anti-Catholicism towards a broad anti-Christian campaign. In December 1910, Haeckel announced his withdrawal from the Protestant Church, and the following year the League became the chief sponsor of the Committee of the Confessionless, a secularist alliance of liberal monists and social democratic freethinkers, who waged a four-year campaign to encourage mass desertion from the state churches. The high point of this campaign came in 1913, when pairs of prominent 'bourgeois' and 'socialist' dissidents appeared on six open-air stages around Berlin to denounce the state churches. A crowd of several thousand was drawn to the joint appearance of the Monist League's chairman, Wilhelm Ostwald, with the future founder of the Communist Party, Karl Liebknecht (Kaiser 1982).

Atheism featured in the radicalization of the socialist milieu at this time. On Ascension Day 1914, the Berlin free religious congregation dared the authorities by publicizing a 'May Festival of the Godless', to be held in a local brewery. Between choral pieces and recitations of Goethe, some 6000 Berliners heard a keynote speech, 'Why we are godless', given by the congregation's chairman, Adolph Hoffmann. Hoffman was a radical socialist deputy in the Prussian Diet, famous for his anticlerical and antimonarchic wit, who customarily ended his speeches by calling for a 'mass strike' against the state church. 'Let God rule above the clouds', he told the audience,

> so that he cannot watch too closely those who constantly misuse his name through their actions. We have pulled God from his cloudy heights, planted him in our hearts and call him conscience in us. We are godless, because we see how the preachers pray each day for war. We celebrate the resurrection of life each year in nature and in humanity. (*Der Freidenker* 1914, 117)

The outbreak of war a little over a month later permanently divided German secularism. Some of the free religious sought to formulate a specifically German, spiritual monism, compatible with a national civil religion. Nationalist monists, such as Haeckel and Ostwald, abruptly dropped their advocacy of pacifism and became active campaigners for the German war aims. By contrast, the Berlin monists formed the nucleus of Germany's most prominent anti-war organization. Unable to thwart this turn, Ostwald

resigned his presidency in 1915 and Haeckel and popular science writer Wilhelm Bölsche distanced themselves from the organization.

As the socialist party divided in 1916 and 1917 into a moderate 'Majority' and a radical 'Independent' socialist party, most secularists joined the latter. The leading national Catholic paper *Germania* described it as a division between 'neutrals' on one side and 'declared atheists and opponents of religion' on the other.[7] At war's end, Berlin Free Religionists attained leading posts in the revolutionary power-sharing government. Hoffmann was appointed Co-minister of Culture in Prussia and quickly attempted to dismantle the confessional system by announcing a total separation of church and state and the removal of religious instruction from schools. The resulting uproar from both state churches led the majority socialists to reverse this decree and paved the way for the compromises of the Weimar Constitution.

The Weimar Republic and the 'Third Reich'

The Weimar Constitution did not remove the legal framework that fuelled secularist agitation. Despite a formal declaration of separation, the major churches retained some of their previous rights, such as state collection of church taxes and confessional education in schools. Secularists were placated with the hope for future access to these confessional goods. The constitution stated that associations that 'dedicate themselves to the common cultivation of a worldview' could apply to become 'corporations of public law' – the status given to churches. In practice, many of the secularist petitions for such status, particularly from socialist freethinkers, were rejected.[8]

The most striking development in Weimar-era secularism was the dominance of its socialist wing. The nationalist monists who had left during the war largely did not return to the secularist organizations and several drifted into the growing völkisch camp. The remaining leaders of the monists, free religious, and freethinkers issued statements linking their organizations, if only in spirit, with the aims of socialism. Some went a step further and joined the socialist parties. The power these parties gained over city councils and state governments in the early Weimar Republic provided secularist

7 As quoted in *Der Atheist*, 18 March 1917.

8 In 1928 the Prussian Landtag rejected the request of the German Monist League for 'state funds for worldview organizations standing on a scientific foundation', and in 1930 a request by Germany's largest secularist organization for the status of public corporation was rejected. *Drucksachen des Preußischen Landtages*, 3. Wahlperiode, 1. Tagung 1928/30. Nr. 4178.

reformers with conditions in which they could experiment with the educational, technological, and communitarian fantasies that they had developed before the war.

The most influential German secularist organization of the first half of the 1920s was the Community of Proletarian Freethinkers (Gemeinschaft proletarischer Freidenker). In Berlin, a rival association offered an attractive cremation insurance to its members. Following the merger of the two associations, membership soared to nearly 600,000 members in 1928, with 226,369 in Berlin alone (Kaiser 1981, 180).

Proletarian freethought also grew enormously in Austria and Czechoslovakia. Seeking to launch a socialist alternative to the 'bourgeois' Brussels Freethought International, the central Europeans constituted a new International of Proletarian Freethought (IPF) in the Czechoslovakian town of Teplitz-Schönau in May 1925 (*Protokoll der konstituierenden Sitzung* 1925). It began as a predominantly German-speaking affair, but soon included the recently founded Soviet League of the Godless (*Protokoll über die Verhandlungen* 1926). The IPF required functionaries to stand 'fully on the foundation of Marxism'; however, its charter reserved, as a 'special task' of the freethought movement, the 'realization of culture of community of all peoples and races' through the 'destruction of religious and bourgeois ideologies in the heads of the proletariat' (*Protokoll der konstituierenden Sitzung* 1925, 11–14).

In the late 1920s, the Communist Party sought to usurp control of the freethought movement from the socialists and made church-leaving a key part of 'class struggle'. The sudden communist interest in freethought was an outgrowth of developments in the USSR, where anti-religious agitation played a major role in the collectivization and the 'cultural revolution', which began in earnest in 1928. German communists imported the crude anticlerical style of the Soviet 'Godless', and by the early 1930s communist freethinkers were selling German-language freethought journals from the Soviet Union on the streets of Berlin. To stave off a communist takeover from the inside and to prevent a government ban from without, the socialist-dominated leadership formed an alliance with liberals and took the moderate-sounding name German Freethought Association (Deutsche Freidenker-Verein) in 1931.

With the shift from anticlericalism to the apparent effort to liquidate Christianity in the USSR in late 1929 and the rise of rude anticlericalism in Germany, the Catholic bishops issued warnings in February 1930 of 'storm waves of godlessness' that were threatened to wash over Germany. This

engendered a fierce culture war between 1930 and 1933 that reveals how confessional dynamics shaped politics in the terminal years of the Weimar Republic. In early 1930, the reactionary leader of the Bavarian chapter of Germany's largest veterans organization, Steel Helmet (*Stahlhelm*), saw in the fight against godlessness a chance for the 'religious-moral rebirth of our people' and proposed a joint struggle with 'both confessions in closest cooperation'. A month later, the Catholic aristocrat and later Chancellor Franz von Papen created a pressure group called the German Association for the Protection of Western Culture and sought common cause with French rightists. Antisecularism became a key binding agent for formations promoting authoritarian solutions to the deepening political crises in Germany and, indeed, across Europe (Weir 2015, 201–38).[9]

The collaboration of the Christian Churches with National Socialism has been the subject of significant recent scholarship (Bergen 1996; Steigmann-Gall 2003; Heschel 2008). However, the history of secularism points to the significance not of a religious, but rather of a confessional basis of collusion. The affirmation of 'positive Christianity' in the 1920 programme of the NSDAP reflected the party's commitment to an ecumenical struggle against atheist secularism and Judaism. Hitler repeatedly used this logic to parry charges that his party was anti-Christian. At a rally in Munich in 1927 he stated that:

> They have accused us of being against the church, [of being] bad Christians or not Christian at all. If one understands only *Konfession* under Christianity, then we are indeed bad Christians. But if the word of the Lord is authoritative, then we are the best. We National Socialists refuse to bring confessional strife into our ranks ... We serve Christ better than those who conclude electoral alliances with Marxists, atheists and Jews. (Dusik 1992, 314–19)

After the election victory of the Nazi coalition on 5 March 1933, the Nazis made good on their threats to neutralize Jews and atheists. In mid-March, the SA stormed the Berlin headquarters of the German Freethought Association, removed its political leadership and propaganda arm, and transformed the cremation insurance business into a non-political operation. The Monist League was likewise disbanded (Nöthlich et al. 2007, 47). These actions, together with the 7 April ban on Jews holding state office, effectively reversed the deconfessionalization of the German state that had occurred in the aftermath of the World War.

9 On the European dimensions of antisecularism, see Roulin (2010).

In the early phase of the 'Third Reich', many secularists and their Christian enemies continued to view the political struggle in the same terms as they had before Hitler's appointment. Several Catholic bishops made statements in the course of 1933 thanking the regime for eliminating the threat of godlessness and in 1934 the motto adopted by the Protestant Church for Reformation Day was: 'With a strong hand our state has broken the public resistance of the antichristian powers' (Central Protestant Archive).

As the National Socialist movement radicalized and began to give greater vent to its own anticlericalism and its own form of racialized monism, its leadership took great pains to avoid association with atheism and secularism more generally. In 1936 and 1937, the party began to pressure its members to leave the state churches. For this they needed a new constitutional term. Rather than use the term 'confessionless' or 'dissident', which had become too associated with secularism, socialism, and atheism, they adopted the neologism 'gottgläubig' (believing in God).

The Cold War and Divided Germany

Ultimately, it may be argued that it was the postwar settlement of Germany and Europe rather than National Socialist religious policy that ushered in the greatest transformation of Germany's confessional field. The massive migration and socioeconomic homogenization caused by the war and its aftermath significantly diluted confessional milieus. Most importantly for the struggle between secularism and Christianity, the politics of Germany's division prevented a return to the confessional antagonisms that had characterized the period prior to 1933.

Although freethought was not allowed to reconstitute in East Germany, the Communist Party, which took the name Socialist Unity Party (SED) in 1946, embraced the policies of German socialist secularists. Congruent with 'building socialism', the SED suppressed the churches and began to engineer the secularization of the population. After having been rocked by a popular uprising on 17 June 1953, the regime mined the secularist tradition for some community-forming culture. Following the example of the Soviet Union, which had transformed the League of the Godless into a society for science popularization in 1947, in 1954 the SED founded the Society for the Propagation of Scientific Knowledge. In the same year, the free religious confirmation or *Jugendweihe* was adopted as a national ritual, for which 'ideas about a paradise in heaven are not to be discussed, but rather the unity of ideas about paradise on earth' (Polianski 2007, 269). At the ceremony, each

child was presented with a picture book of the materialist-socialist worldview entitled *Universe, Earth, Man*. The East German state founded a number of institutes of 'scientific atheism' including a chair for the subject at the University of Jena in 1962 (Tóth 2020, 184). However, by the end of the 1960s, the East German state began to withdraw from efforts to establish an atheistic socialist culture.

In postwar West Germany, confessional disputes had been dampened in the interests of anti-communist solidarity. Even though state privileges for the Catholic and Protestant Churches survived, they failed to stimulate significant anticlerical activity. The free religious, monist and freethought associations were refounded, but they remained small and quiescent compared to the Weimar era. The quest for worldview and anticlericalism had been discredited by the Nazi defeat and were now closely associated with the Communism that threatened from the East. In an atmosphere in which the slogan 'No experiments!' won elections, utopianism of the secularist variety lost its currency. The Bad Godesberg program of 1959 marked the retreat of the SPD from Marxism and from materialist worldview more generally. The following years saw an increasing erosion of the working-class milieu, which had provided an important confessional anchor to organized secularism.

Surveying the secularist landscape in 1962, Karl Hutten, a well-informed Protestant theologian, described an ongoing crisis and decline: 'The German Freethought Association has been gripped by uncertainty, because its recruitment efforts are so ineffective and its membership is stagnating.' Hutten noted that the worldview associations were falling victim to the very same forces of secularization that were threatening the churches during the ongoing postwar economic boom: 'the attractive pleasures of this world – the sphere of affluence – the television – the fat years' (Hutten 1962). This decline accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s. Articles in secularist journals revealed the influence of the new social movements, but at the same time its authors lamented that their movements were not able to attract young people. The nationwide membership of the free religious congregations dropped from 55,000 in 1967 to 39,500 in 1979.

Germany since Reunification

In the decades since reunification in 1990, German secularism has been marked by two trends, both of which brought it closer to the churches. First, the same secularization process that led to the significant drop-off in

church attendance in united Germany also impacted secularism. The wave of church-leaving that followed reunification and has continued into the twenty-first century occurred without the encouragement of secularists and did not benefit them. Most secularist organizations no longer advertise their membership numbers, likely because they have fallen off so dramatically. It is telling that the last issue of the newsletter of the once numerous Munich chapter of the German Freethought Association closed in 1991 with an advertisement for its retirement home, named 'Ludwig Feuerbach': 'Here Freethinkers, Communists, Socialists and Humanists can find a good atmosphere in which they can enjoy the twilight of their lives in a circle of like-minded [individuals]' (Freidenker-Info 1991). The isolation of socialist and communist freethought was deepened by the loss of the Soviet Union as an ideological anchor.

A countervailing trend is found in the Humanist Association of Germany (Humanistischer Verband Deutschland, HVD), which was the name taken by an association of Berlin freethinkers in 1993. The HVD's remarkable growth came as an unexpected windfall from German reunification. When the West German constitution and laws were extended to the East, the confessional structures, including religious instruction in schools, were also imported. The large number of East Berlin schoolchildren, whose parents or grandparents had left the churches, now had the right to religious instruction in the schools according to their 'confession'. The West Berlin SPD-affiliated branch of the German Freethought Association had been providing alternative ethical instruction in West Berlin on a modest scale since the early 1980s. Following the unification with East Berlin, the number of pupils attending ethics instruction in Berlin grew sixteen-fold from *c.* 2000 in 1990 to 33,374 in 2001. This provided the freethinkers with the opportunity to hire a slew of ethics teachers, whose salaries were paid from state coffers ('20 Jahre' 2001, 4). What was novel in the freethinkers' ethical instruction was their audience. They did not target members of their organization, but rather the growing number of confessionless German citizens.

The HVD has extended this model to a number of other caritative functions, for which it presents itself as a service provider, not to its members but to the segment of the public alienated from traditional religion. Its current 'offering' lists the following services: 'kindergartens, ethical instruction, Humanistic schools, youth services, the Young Humanists, ceremonial culture [Jugendweihe], cultural work and associational life, health and social work, adult education, hospices, end of life support and grief counseling, living wills'. This list of services is similar to that offered by the churches;

what is more remarkable is that these services are financed by the state. In 2013, 50 percent of the budget of the HVD Bavaria came from state coffers and an additional amount from school-related revenues, leaving a mere 2 per cent to come from the membership fees of individual humanists ('Unsere Finanzierung' 2013).

The former atheist freethinkers are not unaware of the irony of history. In the final decade of the twentieth century, secularists finally came to partake of some of the essential goods that had defined the confessional field since the mid-nineteenth century. The development of the HVD is certainly in keeping with endogenous developments within secularism. For example, the choice of 'humanist' to replace the terms 'freethought', 'free religion', and 'Freigeistig' had been widely mooted since the 1960s and was in keeping with the growing use of 'humanism' internationally. However, it also fit the strategic logic of the bid by the Berlin freethinkers to present themselves as reliable suppliers of quasi-governmental services, based on the model established by the state churches. Disaffiliating itself from narrow political or sectarian positions, as well as from obligatory atheism, was a necessary step for the HVD to take if it wanted to be accepted as a responsible provider of ethical instruction in schools. At the same time, the HVD has devoted considerable scholarly energy towards defining humanism as a worldview and writing its own history. This allows it to fulfil the legal stipulations found in the Weimar Constitution and carried forward in the Basic Law, which require that organizations 'cultivate a worldview' and show a stable structure over time, if they wish to enjoy the status of 'corporation of public law' and gain access to state support. In keeping with this ambition, the HVD has proposed that humanism be considered the 'third confession' of Germany. Yet, as church observer Andreas Fincke has pointed out, this claim that organized secularism might actually represent the growing population of passive atheists is very thin. In fact, despite the jump in the number of students receiving ethical instruction and the continued popularity of the *Jugendweihe*, there has not been a significant increase in the number of organized secularists. Contemporary Germans are apparently disinclined to turn to secularist organizations for the 'cultivation' of an atheistic worldview.

Conclusion

Over the past sixty years, it can be established that the three varieties of atheism – as philosophical project, as mass religious indifference, and as active secularism – have interacted. The 1960s marked a crucial turning

point in the relation of all three. There was a brief resurgence of interest in intellectual atheism, particularly within theological circles, whether in Dorothee Soelle's 'death of God theology' (1966) or in the reception of Ernst Bloch's *Atheism in Christianity* (1968). The decade saw a dramatic rise in mass atheism, marked by significant de-churching in Germany, but also by a continuing drop in public interest in secularist atheism. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and reunification in 1990, Germany has seen a continuation of these trends. Overall, at least until recently, interest in secularist atheism has remained low, while mass atheism, as religious indifference, has increased. Yet, as a great irony of history, the confessional system has reasserted itself to the benefit of the Humanist Association. For the first time, a secularist association has come to enjoy wide access to confessional goods. The dechristianization of Eastern Germany and the ongoing de-churching in the West have opened up an enormous clientele for the services of the humanists. This and the depoliticization of religion have weakened the claim of the Christian Churches to a continued monopoly. Yet, the humanist claim to represent the confessionless population of Germany is questionable. It seems that without state support the HVD might be languishing along with the other secularist organizations. Thus, it appears that German freethought shares with the state churches the fate of becoming a 'welfare' religion in two senses: like the churches, it increasingly focuses on providing educational and social services while becoming itself more dependent on state support. The contemporary threat that rising religious indifference poses to Christianity and organized secularism alike may be taken as a final indication of the way that the confessional context has shaped the history of atheist secularism and its contribution to modern German history.

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The Nordic and Baltic Countries

TEEMU TAIRA, ATKO REMMEL, AND ANTON JANSSON

Introduction: The Most Atheistic Countries in the World?

Unbelief in God is a normal position, and atheism is a relatively accepted – though not extremely popular – identification in northern Europe. Most of northern Europe has historically been dominated by Protestant Churches, and in many countries the relationship between church and state has been very close. Variants of Christianity have played a significant role in the formation of national identities, although not equally for each northern European nation. The aim of this chapter is to explore Nordic and Baltic countries to make sense of the peculiarities of these areas and nations in an international comparison. This chapter will use the terms 'Nordic' and 'Baltic', the first referring to five countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – and the second to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In our use, 'Scandinavia' is a narrower term than 'Nordic', and includes Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

We will reflect on whether it makes sense to write about Nordic and Baltic countries in a single chapter, as they cover a big part of northern Europe and a slice of eastern Europe, too. In that sense, this chapter is about the very northern part of Europe and northeast Europe (excluding Russia). We will not argue that there is one distinctive trait or factor that justifies this selection or makes it necessary. However, we propose that comparing and contrasting the selected areas, countries, and nations may provide a good opportunity to understand similarities and differences between the eight nations, as well as highlight some rarely underlined aspects. Conversely, the selection breaks down the typical tendency to think about these countries separately, given that there are obvious and interesting intersections between them.

In an international comparison, the whole of northern Europe is less religious than most other areas in the world. Phil Zuckerman's (2007)

famous, albeit problematic, list of the fifty most atheistic nations in the world contains all of the Nordic and Baltic countries. They appear in the following order: Sweden (first), Denmark (third), Norway (fourth), Finland (seventh), Estonia (tenth and also forty-first), Latvia (twenty-first), Iceland (twenty-eighth) and Lithuania (thirty-seventh). It suggests that Nordic countries are very highly positioned among the most atheistic countries, while Baltic countries are less so, although they are higher on the list than many southern European nations. Estonia is mistakenly included twice; the higher position is based on the percentage of unbelievers and the lower on the atheist identification. As most of the ranking is based on unbelief in a personal God, it is best to forget the lower position in the case of Estonia.

The Nordic and Baltic countries are mainly Protestant, and particularly Lutheran, except Lithuania, where almost 80 per cent are Catholics. Today, all of these countries are religiously diverse, and all have a significant number of people who are religiously unaffiliated, do not believe in God, or identify as atheists. The dominant churches have had – and still have – a close relationship with the state, even in countries where a formal separation between the two is very clear, such as Sweden. It may be possible to claim that Nordic and Baltic countries (excluding Lithuania) are among the most atheistic countries in the world, but, as will be shown in this chapter, the argument needs to be qualified very carefully, country by country, because different national histories characterize the type, role, and significance of atheism – including its popularity and the ways in which it is organized (if at all) – in each place. It is only after this that a comparison between the Nordic and Baltic states and the rest of Europe makes sense.

Atheism in the Nordic Countries

The Nordic countries have clear similarities in terms of their historical conditions and developments regarding religion and atheism. All have had some kind of Lutheran state church after the Protestant Reformation, most experienced a wave of cultural and political radicalism towards the end of the nineteenth century, and all have had politically dominant social democratic parties during much of the twentieth century, leading to strong social democratic welfare states. Today they also count among the most secular countries in the world. Culturally, they are close to one another. With the exception of Finland and Iceland, their languages are similar. Their cultural debates and networks have sometimes overlapped, not least during the nineteenth century, when ideas about pan-Scandinavianism flourished.

However, while such similarities exist, there are also differences in their respective histories of atheism.

Sweden

The 1880s and 1890s saw a peak in freethought and atheism in Sweden. Many of the early leading socialists were materialists and freethinkers, although they did not necessarily identify as atheists. The socialists, however, especially after the foundation of the Social Democratic Party, toned down their criticism of religion and declared religion a 'private matter'. This stance was sharpened partly in a polemic by the most noted atheist of the nineteenth century, Viktor Lennstrand, who for a few years around 1890 was one of the most famous – or infamous – people in Sweden. The freethought popular movement that Lennstrand wanted to create was perceived as both a potential ally and competitor of early social democracy. When he died before the age of thirty-five, he had managed to agitate in large parts of Sweden, complete a couple of prison sentences, publish a number of pamphlets and tracts, and start an organization for freethinkers with two attached journals. The organization he founded, the Utilist Society (*Utilistiska samfundet*), at its peak had almost 2000 members and local congregations in a handful of Swedish cities, but it did not survive the death of its initiator (Jansson 2020).

During the early part of the twentieth century, there were some noted freethinkers, such as the economist Knut Wicksell, who served a prison sentence for blasphemy in 1909. During the interwar era, it was mostly those to the left of the social democrats who propagated atheism. The social democrats, who made up the governmental party between 1932 and 1976, balanced between secularist reforms, such as scrapping Christian education in schools in the 1960s, and trying to accommodate the Church into their welfare state project, sometimes referred to as the people's home (*folkhem*).

If the early postwar era in many western countries was a period of religious resurgence and growth, the trend in Sweden (which had been neutral during World War II) was almost the opposite. The most important figure during these years was a professor of philosophy, Ingemar Hedenius, whose book *Tro och vetande* (*Belief and Knowledge*) had a large impact. When it was published in 1949, it instigated one of the major Swedish public debates of the century. Hedenius attacked the truth content of Christianity from a philosophical perspective and, more importantly, polemicized against leading Swedish bishops and theologians. This has been called the moment

'when atheism conquered Sweden'. While that may be an exaggeration, Hedenius' book and the debate around it did have a major impact, and Hedenius has become somewhat of a symbol for atheism and critiques against church–state relations (Jansson 2018). There was also a new law for freedom of religion in 1951, which finally allowed citizens to leave the state church without joining another religious denomination. However, even though some public intellectuals tried to encourage people to leave, there was no major exodus from the Lutheran Church of Sweden. In 1975, 95 per cent of the population were still members of the Church; in 1995, it was 86 per cent. As we will see, these numbers have continued to drop.

While there were a few attempts to found secularist and atheist organizations during the twentieth century, until recently there has been no society more prominent than Lennstrand's Utilist Society. Nonetheless, Humanists Sweden (*Humanisterna*) has grown to become a notable player in the Swedish public sphere. Founded in 1979, inspired by the larger Norwegian association, *Humanisterna* experienced a boom in the early twenty-first century under the leadership of noted IT entrepreneur Christer Sturmark, gaining from the international wave of 'New Atheism'. *Humanisterna* currently have around 5000 members and a dozen local organizations around the country. Founded on secular humanism and being a member of Humanists International, they assist with secular ceremonies, debate religion and science, and, as one of their most noted activities, grant the annual Ingemar Hedenius award, recipients of which have included journalists, activists, scientists, and politicians, as well as the former ABBA member Björn Ulvaeus, who is one of the most prominent Swedish atheists today (Jansson 2018).

In 2018, 58 per cent of the Swedish population were members of the Church of Sweden. This figure has fallen dramatically since the separation of state and church in 2000; furthermore, since 1996 no one has been automatically born into the Church of Sweden (today parents have to actively choose that their children become members). Other Christian denominations and religions account for some 5–10 per cent, although there may be overlaps in membership. Since the separation in 2000, the Church of Sweden is not a state church in the narrow sense, but this should be qualified, since the state retains some legislative authority over the Church, which still receives tax funding. Similar support is now given to other religious denominations, but not to worldview organizations such as *Humanisterna* (Furseth 2018, ch. 3).

Because of the historically tight bonds between citizenship and membership in the Church of Sweden, membership does not necessarily mean belief

in God. Surveys have shown that some 45 per cent of Swedes believe in God. When this is qualified, however, the number drops – in the Eurobarometer 2010, only 18 per cent claimed to believe in God and a further 35 per cent in a 'spirit or life force'. Around 40–55 per cent tend to claim to be non-believers, including atheists or agnostics. The number of people actually saying that they are atheists ranges between 14 and 19 per cent in surveys from the 2010s. To be an atheist today is an uncontroversial position. In a national survey study from 2016, a clear majority claimed to have an indifferent attitude towards atheism.

Denmark

Denmark is the only Scandinavian country that still has a state church, although the exact definition of what constitutes a state church is contested. However, with the Constitution of 1849, religious freedom was granted; any Danish citizen was free to leave the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Thus, compared to Sweden, towards the late nineteenth century there was a more liberal setting, which did not preclude strong radical polemics against the church establishment at the time.

The Danish literary historian and critic Georg Brandes was a key figure for cultural radicalism in Denmark and Scandinavia in general, which included freethought and strong attacks on Christianity. Well-visited and intensively discussed, the lectures he gave on European literature in 1871, which included a powerful critique against tradition, had a large impact on public debate. They were held as 'atheist and anti-Christian' by bishops, and although Brandes did not prefer the epithet 'atheist' in public, more privately he expressed how he hated Christianity to the marrow of his bones. Together with the author J. P. Jacobsen, Brandes founded a literary society, *Litteratursamfundet*, popularly called an association for freethinkers (*Fritænkerforeningen*), which organized lectures and published texts that were critical of religion. Jacobsen played an important role in expanding the ability to express atheism in the public sphere. His translation of *On the Origin of Species* made Darwin a public name in Denmark, while the novel about a doubter, *Niels Lyhne*, was a big hit throughout all of Scandinavia (Kjærgaard et al. 2008).

Danish social democracy was established a bit earlier than Swedish social democracy. Religion was declared a 'private matter' in the earliest party programme in 1876. The social democrats were not necessarily atheists, but especially during the earlier days they were often anticlerical and critical of the

church as an institution, which they thought had thwarted the positive message of Jesus. They advocated politics of separation between state and church, but this was strongly toned down during the first decades of the twentieth century, especially when they became the ruling party in the 1920s. More officially, they embraced the 'folk church' (*Folkekirken*) during the postwar era.

Organizations for unbelief have historically been less successful in Denmark than in the other Scandinavian countries. In the twenty-first century, however, two organizations have managed to attract a larger membership and more public attention. The Danish Atheist Society (*Ateistisk selskab*), founded in 2002, is an organization for non-believers, with the purpose of spreading atheism and working for the separation of state and religion. The Danish Humanist Society (*Humanistisk samfund*), founded in 2008, is a member of Humanists International and similar in size to *Ateistisk selskab*, with around 1000 members; it is less explicitly atheist or against Christianity, but nonetheless represents a secularist organization that is critical of all supernatural views of reality. Despite having fewer members than its Scandinavian sister organizations, it has active local groups and provides help with secular ceremonies.

Phil Zuckerman has famously lumped Denmark and Sweden together as the least religious countries in the world (2008; 2009), but Danes tend to be slightly more religious. In the beginning of 2019, 75 per cent of Danish citizens were members of the state church. In a Pew Research Center study from 2017, 65 per cent of Danes identified as Christian, compared to 51–2 per cent in Norway and Sweden. This is congruent with numbers from the Eurobarometer and World Values Survey, which show that there are more believers in Denmark, relatively speaking. In 2010, 28 per cent believed in God and a further 47 per cent in a life force. While the number of atheists is not that low in comparison to Sweden, ranging between 6 and 16 per cent in various surveys, indifferent non-believers or agnostics tend to be fewer. Furseth (2018, 307) has argued that the reasons for the relatively stronger position of Christian belief may be due to Denmark having historically had a more liberal and inclusive version of Christianity, and recently a sharper politicization of Islam, which has led to a somewhat stronger bond between the church and national identity.

Norway

Norway has been closely tied to its Nordic neighbours. Until 1814, there was a dual monarchy of Denmark and Norway, and Norwegian culture was very

connected to that of Denmark. After this, until 1905, Norway was in a so-called personal union with Sweden. As was also the case with their Scandinavian neighbours, the cultural and political radicalism of the later part of the nineteenth century contained a critique against the state church.

The main wing of Norwegian socialism has been the Labour Party (*Arbeiderpartiet*). Founded in 1887, the party wanted to disband the state-funded Church of Norway in its first programme, but that was taken out of the platform in 1901. There were more anti-religious voices within the movement, however, such as the 'young socialists'. When the Labour Party turned Communist in 1918 and became a member of the Comintern, these strands became more visible. Toward Today (*Mot dag*), the influential socialist group of the interwar years, also contained famous atheists, such as the author Arnulf Øverland, who in 1933 drew fury from Christians with a lecture in which he called Christianity a national plague.

What stands out in the case of Norway is the size and status of the humanists, the Norwegian Humanist Association (*Human-etisk Forbund*; HEF). In 2018 they had around 90,000 members, which is around 2 per cent of the population. This means they are one of the largest humanist or atheist organizations in the world (in terms of both relative and absolute numbers). The reasons for their success are multiple. Founded in 1956, the HEF grew out of an organization arranging civil confirmations, the leaders of which had also followed the founding of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU; today Humanists International) in 1952. Another reason was the so-called 'hell debate' of 1953, referring to the reaction against the conservative Christian establishment when a theologian gave a sermon about the reality of hell, which was broadcast on Norwegian public radio (Knutsen 2006).

In its early days, HEF was a small organization led by the botanist Kristian Horn. When Horn was succeeded by the former Pentecostal preacher Levi Fragell as leader of the HEF in 1976, a new era began for the organization. As a student, Fragell had arranged campaigns for convincing people to leave the state church, and under his leadership the HEF turned towards a more activist and action-oriented way of working, including strategic steps to expand the organization. This coincided with favourable external factors. Established Christianity was still experienced by many as oppressive and conservative, characterized by further statements about eternal damnation, and castigated for a controversial practice of exorcism in the city of Bergen in 1978. The HEF started to receive some public support, but a decisive shift came in 1981 when worldview organizations were granted state support similar to that of other religious organizations. This entailed an important

institutional and financial foundation for continuing growth and establishment. In 1975, the HEF had 1500 members; in 1986, it had 30,000, a number that has since tripled. The HEF has local groups around the country and is a major provider of life ceremonies. Since the 1980s, Norway has been seen as an example for other humanist organizations. Indeed, Levi Fragell belonged to the leadership of the IHEU for many years, acting as its sole president between 1998 and 2003 (Knutsen 2006). In 1974, the more provocative Norwegian Heathen Society (*Det norske Hedningsamfunn*) was founded. Since 2017, the organization has been called the Atheists (*Ateistene*), and it has had at most around 1000 members.

In 2017, there was a formal separation between state and church in Norway, although, as in Sweden, bonds between state and church are still there (Furseth 2018, ch. 3). In 2018, 70 per cent of the Norwegian population were members of the Church of Norway. As with the other cases, this does not equal belief in God. In a Monitor survey from 2017, 46 per cent claimed that they did not believe in God, while only 34 per cent said that they did. The number of self-confessed atheists ranges between 9 and 12 per cent in surveys from the 2010s. Those who are religiously unaffiliated, although not all unbelievers, are on average younger than those who are religiously affiliated (or humanists); this is the fastest growing category in the Norwegian religious landscape (Urstad 2017).

Iceland

About 7 per cent of Icelanders are religiously unaffiliated. The biggest religious denomination, the Lutheran Church of Iceland, comprises 65 per cent of the population, and there are also several indigenous religious and other Christian groups. According to the 2012 Global Religiosity and Atheism Index, Iceland has 10 per cent convinced atheists and 31 per cent non-religious persons on top of that, making it both one of the most secular countries in the world and one of the most quickly secularizing countries. Other surveys have shown that 18–26 per cent say they do not believe in God, indicating that the 2012 poll is relatively trustworthy. Founded in 1990, with close ties to the Norwegian HEF, the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association (*Siðmennt*) is of notable size; with 2841 members in 2018, it represents more than 10 per cent of the religiously unaffiliated. Similar to the case of Norway, *Siðmennt* is officially recognized as a worldview organization and receives state funding. It has created events about atheism and provides secular ceremonies.

Finland

Finland is a country with strong historical relations between church-belonging and national identity. There is no state church as such, but the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Finnish Orthodox Church have a privileged role guaranteed by law. In the 1980s, 90 per cent of the population were members of the Lutheran Church, but by 2019 the percentage had fallen to slightly below 70 per cent. Approximately 27 per cent are unaffiliated and the rest belong to various Christian denominations and non-Christian religious communities. About 23 per cent of Finns do not believe in God, whereas 33 per cent believe in God as the Lutheran Church teaches. The rest are undecided, believe in their own way, or doubt the existence of God. Depending on the formulation of the question and the options given, the percentage of those identifying as non-religious vary from 24 to almost 60 per cent. Atheism has consistently been a less popular identification. Various surveys show that the percentage can be anything between 3 and 16 per cent. The general pattern is pretty clear. Declining but still high church membership is combined with low activity in religious participation and a reluctance to claim an atheist identity. Typically, Finns are members of the church, but they participate only during rites of passage, such as baptisms, marriages, funerals, and possibly during Christmas, when special songs and hymns are sung. Some of the figures have been steady, as in the case of funerals, whereas others, like marriage, have been falling. Nowadays, less than half of all marriages in Finland are church-related.

The early history of Finnish atheism is tied to Enlightenment influences. The ideas of Voltaire and Julien Offray de la Mettrie were known already in eighteenth-century Finland. The nineteenth-century nationalists knew the Enlightenment philosophers and their criticism of religion, but, following Kant, religion was considered useful for private morality. Atheism was discussed only by the most educated intellectual elite, having little practical impact on the rest of society. It was around the end of the nineteenth century that unbelievers first began to campaign for freedom of religion. Atheism was rarely an issue for ordinary people before the cultural radicalism of the 1960s, but in order to understand the current situation a broader look at the twentieth century is required.

Finland gained its independence from Russia in 1917 and the Freedom of Religion law was enacted soon thereafter in 1923, making it easier to embrace non-religiosity or non-established religiosity. Culturally, however, Finland remained strongly Lutheran, particularly in the construction of its national

identity. The Church was especially involved in identity-building during the period of independence and the civil war (1918), when it supported the winning anti-Communist side, as well as during World War II, when Finland was fighting against the Soviet Union, officially an atheist and Communist country. The fact that atheism has been associated with Communism, along with the role of the Lutheran Church in national history, explains why it has been an unpopular identity. Practically speaking, being atheist has meant something akin to being anti-Finnish. This history locates Finland as different from other Nordic countries and closer to the Eastern bloc, despite the fact that the social structures were – and still are – more similar to the other Nordic countries, with their strong welfare states.

In recent decades, the connection between Communism and atheism has weakened. For younger generations who have not lived during the era of the Soviet Union, atheism tends to be associated with the natural sciences, the theory of evolution, and Darwinism. Furthermore, they have grown up in an increasingly diverse Finland, especially due to migration since the 1990s. One consequence of this increasing diversity is that the number of registered religious communities has gone up. This is an example of how a broader range of convictions is making atheism a more accepted and normal identification than it used to be in the more monoreligious twentieth century.

There are several atheist and secular humanist organizations in Finland, but the most visible is the Union of Freethinkers in Finland (*Vapaa-ajattelijain Liitto*), founded in 1937. It is a fairly small association with approximately 1500 members. It used to be strongly left-wing in its political outlook, but nowadays, particularly since the emergence of 'New Atheism', its political position has become more complicated: while the Marxist critique of religion still prevails, many members relate more to the natural sciences and a Dawkins-type criticism; at the same time, the traditional criticism of the relations between church and state has extended to include criticism of Islam, gender studies, and postmodernism. The Finnish Humanist Alliance (*Suomen Humanistiliitto*), founded in 1968 partly as a reaction to the allegedly Communist freethinkers, has functioned side by side and sometimes in cooperation with freethinkers, but its main strategy has been to interact closely with those who deal with education, rather than to provoke public debate through criticism of religion.

The typical attitude in Finland, even among the religiously indifferent population, is that atheist organizations are unnecessary provocateurs who do not have much constructive to say about the direction of the nation. However, some clearly targeted activities regarding the rights of unaffiliated

people in educational contexts have been particularly successful and raised atheists' willingness to stand up for their rights (Taira 2012).

Atheism in the Baltic Countries

The religious landscape of the three Baltic countries – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – is rather different. Lithuania has historically been Catholic, and Catholicism is still connected to its national identity. Estonia and Latvia, on the other hand, have been predominantly Lutheran, but strong influence by the Orthodox Church has also existed, mainly among the Russian population. Compared to the Nordic countries, atheism in the Baltics has been more subordinate to politics, involving mostly socialist or Communist agendas. In that respect, atheism can be regarded not as a primary goal but a secondary feature for achieving certain changes in society. Apart from the Soviet-era, state-supported body known as the Knowledge Society (*Znanie*), the tradition of secularist organizations in the Baltic countries has been rather weak, and most of the attempts to maintain them have been short-lived.

Estonia

Since atheism has historically been a prerogative of the elite, the earliest point of somewhat developed religio-critical thinking in Estonian-language culture can be located in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Estonian intelligentsia began to develop in connection with the national awakening. In the late nineteenth century, religio-critical thinking in Estonia was a mixture of four elements: (1) Marxist and social democratic thinking originating from Russia; (2) western European anticlericalism and freethinking; (3) the development of sciences (especially the theory of evolution); and finally (4) Estonian nationalist identity politics. Through the latter, a critical attitude originated from the romantic glorification of national history and the myth of violent Christianization during the Nordic Crusades in the thirteenth century, mixed with anti-German sentiments, where the Church was seen as the henchman of foreign oppressors. As a result, the Estonian national narrative does not include a connection to any particular religion.

The Russian Revolution of 1905 was a turning point for Estonian nationalism. The events in the Baltic provinces, directed against the ruling government as well as against the Baltic German landowners, had primarily a character of a national and political awakening. After the revolution,

however, the clergy was accused of not protecting their parish members from punitive squads, and Estonians' participation in church services fell considerably. For Baltic Germans, who did not approve of Estonians' nationalist aspirations, church criticism seemed to undermine the status quo, which provided a reason to accuse the Estonians of 'atheism'. Thus emerged the motif of Estonia as 'an anti-religious nation', a characterization motivated not religiously but based on national antagonism between high-class Baltic Germans and lower-class Estonians. Yet, in spite of the whole nation being accused of a denial of God, public atheism in that period was still a curiosity.

In the independent Estonian Republic (1918–40), atheism became 'domesticated' and its variations entrenched in Estonian society and culture, along with the final polishing of the anti-Christian national narrative. Secular thinking was connected with politics, predominantly Communism and social democracy. While Bolshevik atheism pertained mainly to the working class, intelligentsia sided with western European anti-religious thought on the grounds of the science–religion controversy, preferring the 'freethinker' label. Open atheism, however, was still rare; according to a census in 1934, only 2 per cent had no religion.

During the Soviet Occupation (1944–91), atheism seemingly became a mass phenomenon. While atheist positions were generally accepted, mainly due to the successful presentation of the science–religion conflict model and the earlier anti-Christian national narrative, atheism also suffered from low respect due to its close association with the hated Soviet ideology.

The Estonian Republic (independent since 1991) has been recognized as one of the 'most atheist' countries in the world. The visibility of religion and indicators of religiosity are low, and being not religious is the dominant position. According to the Eurobarometer 2010, Estonians had the lowest percentage of belief in a personal God (18 per cent) in Europe, while according to a Gallup Poll in 2007, only 14 per cent claimed that religion was important in their daily lives. The general attitude towards religion can be described as indifferent (Remmel 2016). For this reason, and in contrast with the Nordic countries, there are no atheist organizations apart from the NGO Estonian Skeptic (*Eesti Skeptik*), who are mostly concerned with pseudoscience as a form of alternative religiosity. Indeed, Estonians have drifted away from institutional religion, but a plethora of different beliefs and practices indicate that 'alternative' religiosity is making its way towards becoming a new mainstream religion. Despite Estonia's label as 'the most atheist' country, having an atheist identity is not very popular, particularly if other similar options such as 'non-religious' or 'non-believer' are available

(7 per cent in European Values Survey 2008, but 22 per cent in the Eurobarometer 2015). In addition, its meaning is ambiguous, mostly indicating difference from organized religion.

Latvia

Secular thinking in Latvia, just as in Estonia, emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century as a result of the German Enlightenment, and a secular mind-set developed within the frames of Latvian nationalism. Here, anticlerical thought similarly relied on opposition between high-class Germans and lower-class Latvians, following the same motifs as in Estonia, with a reference to violent Christianization in the thirteenth century and a subsequent '700 years of slavery' under different foreign rulers; again, the Church was perceived as the ally of foreign oppressors. Anticlerical attitudes in the late nineteenth century were influenced by socialist thinking, but while in Estonia the influences came from Russia, in Latvia ideas were appropriated from the German socialist movement and later influenced by Russian Marxists' atheist, anticlerical, and anti-nationalist stance.

In the independent Latvian Republic (1918–40), the main strand of secular thought was represented by Dievturība, a neopagan movement that promoted Latvianness and invoked a Latvian national narrative in its intolerant stance towards Christianity. Another strand was based on Marxism, mostly represented and disseminated by Latvians, who resided in Communist Russia. Still, while the majority of the left-wing circles and intellectuals were predominantly negative about the role of the church and religion, public discussions on atheism and freethinking rarely took place.

Like in other parts of the Soviet empire, in Latvia the atheism of that era just meant that the state supported atheist propaganda and repression of the churches. The Catholic Church was the most problematic due to the anti-Communist stance of the popes, and this led to propaganda targeting Latgale in particular, a predominantly Catholic part of the country. The only institute of higher education in the region, the Pedagogical Institute of Daugavpils, became a centre for atheist messaging. Just like in Estonia, this activity used motifs borrowed from the national narrative of political oppression of Latvians led by German Christian missionaries, while also depicting local folklore and important historical figures as genuinely anticlerical (Kiope et al. 2020).

In contemporary Latvia, about one-quarter of the population identifies as non-religious or atheist. According to the European Values Survey 2008,

20 per cent of the population considered themselves non-religious, while 4 per cent admitted being 'convinced atheists'. In the Eurobarometer 2015, 5 per cent identified as atheists and 17 per cent as non-believers. In the Eurobarometer 2010, only 11 per cent said that they do not believe in God, spirit, or life force, but a Pew Research Center study in 2017 found that 15 per cent do not believe in God. According to the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) 2015, 37 per cent declared that they had no religion, but the percentage was significantly lower in the aforementioned Pew study (21 per cent). Despite the variation, these figures suggest that atheism in Latvia is not far from what is typical in the Nordic and Baltic countries, but slightly closer to the religious end of the spectrum.

As for organized non-religiosity, there are some small organizations such as the Latvian Atheists (since 2011), Sceptical Society (2011), and Latvian Transhumanist Association, which promotes 'rationality, critical thinking and common sense'. All of them act mainly through social media. There is also the Latvian Committee for Combating the Totalitarian Sects (1995), which provides 'professional assistance to victims of sects and cults'.

Lithuania

The first societies of Lithuanian freethinkers were all established in the United States from 1895, but dissolved for different reasons, the last one of them in 1922 after a wave of criticism towards Communism and atheism started in the United States. In Lithuania, the Freethinkers' Society of Ethical Culture (*Laisvamanių etinės kultūros draugija*) was established in 1924, led by the doctor and lawyer Jonas Šliūpas. The activities of the freethought movement before and during the First Republic of Lithuania challenged the role of the dominant Roman Catholic faith within the Lithuanian identity, the relations between state and church (especially in respect to such social institutions as marriage and education), and emphasized scientific knowledge and rationality. The freethought movement became the milieu for supporting left-wing, socialist ideas, but social democrat and Communist politics also included an atheist agenda. The institutionalized support for the Roman Catholic Church during this period led to the marginalization of other worldviews and their practices, including freethinking and atheism, and also to the construction of a narrative of national identity tied to religious identity. Being Lithuanian came to mean also being Roman Catholic. In 1923, less than one-hundredth of 1 per cent of the Lithuanian population declared that they had no religion or were freethinkers or atheists.

In the Soviet period, Khruschev's anti-religious drive in 1958–64 intensified the propaganda of 'scientific atheism' in the form of atheist books and newspaper articles, which typically criticized religion in general but also clerics, declaring religion a vestige of the capitalist past. An important role was played by the Knowledge Society, which delivered lectures on atheism. Atheist propaganda was also spread by the Museum of Atheism in Vilnius, established in 1961, and the Vilnius Planetarium. In 1982, the Centre of Scientific Atheism Research was established in Vilnius; it conducted research, initiated surveys, organized scientific conferences, and published books and leaflets with an aim to research the role of religion and improve atheist indoctrination. Yet, the most effective means of 'atheization', as in other parts of the Soviet Union, was the replacement of religious rituals with civil rituals that covered the entire life cycle, from birth to death. The first new Soviet-style rituals appeared in the Baltic countries in the late 1950s. Celebration of childhood replaced baptisms, and civil marriages in the 'Palaces of Happiness' replaced church weddings. Although originally meant to be anti-religious, secular rituals quickly lost their ideological content.

In contemporary Lithuania, the Constitution declares that 'there is no state religion', but the state recognizes so-called 'traditional' churches and religious organizations, based on historical criteria. There are two officially registered non-religious organizations, the Lithuanian Skeptics Society (*Lietuvos skeptikų draugija*) and the Association of Lithuanian Humanists (*Asociacija Lietuvos humanistai*), which mostly act on social media. Atheism is seen as a remnant of the Communist past; therefore, freethinkers, atheists, agnostics, and non-believers find themselves on the margins in the field of religion and are often antagonized as a threat to national identity, where Roman Catholicism is still considered to be the core element. This is reflected in the empirical data as well. According to the 2011 Census, 16 per cent of the population either did not belong to a religious community or did not declare their belonging, while only 382 persons out of a population of three million reported being an agnostic, freethinker, or atheist. While the public attitude towards atheism is rather negative, atheism and unbelief on the individual level have become a quite common phenomenon among the educated and urban population in contemporary Lithuania (Ališauskiene 2020).

Comparing and Contrasting

When the portions of the religiously unaffiliated, non-believers, and self-identifying atheists are compared in the Nordic and Baltic countries, the

results vary. As there are very few surveys in which all these countries have participated and answered the same questions with the same answer options, the only method is to evaluate several surveys. Practically all demonstrate that Lithuania is the most religious country of them all. Estonia and Sweden typically come up as the most atheist and non-religious ones. The rest are somewhere in between. Finland, Iceland, and Latvia quite often appear to be slightly less atheistic than Denmark and Norway, but some surveys give the opposite result. Nonetheless, all but Lithuania are often ranked in the top 20 or 30 most atheistic countries in the world. Several other European countries are quite similar in this sense, and the differences in surveys are moderate, particularly when the Nordic and Baltic countries are compared to other European countries with a history of Protestantism. The differences and nuances are to be found in national histories, as we have highlighted in this chapter. Southern European Catholic countries and Eastern European Orthodox countries are markedly less atheistic than the Nordic and Baltic countries.

An emerging pattern is relatively clear in comparing the Nordic and Baltic countries to the rest of Europe, and it is even more noticeable when the United States is a point of comparison. It is perhaps for this reason that Phil Zuckerman's (2008) study of irreligiosity in Denmark and Sweden was written against the US norm of not being an atheist. Zuckerman's main claim was that irreligion is not an issue in the Nordic countries: namely, nations can function well without religion. The relative indifference and passivity also explain why atheist identification and organized non-religiosity have not been extremely popular. While Zuckerman's analysis is mainly correct, it is worth emphasizing that, despite all this, the role of the dominant church in each Nordic country is still prominent. Churches have played a big part in the Nordic countries, for instance, in the historical construction of national identities. Furthermore, a large proportion of the population still belongs to these national churches, churches are intertwined with the state and public institutions, and atheist activities are often reported in a negative light. The situation is slightly different in each Baltic country. The most obvious contrast is Estonia, where the historical construction of a national identity has not been strongly based on or related to the Lutheran Church.

While the reasons for the secularism or atheism of the Nordic countries are manifold and complex, the combination of the heritage of the Lutheran state church monopoly and the central role of social democracy seems to have played a role. Zuckerman (2009) has advanced three

decisive factors: the long-standing monopoly of the Lutheran state churches, the integration of women into the labour market, and the social security provided by the welfare state. To this could be added that while social democracy has not always actively pushed atheist or secularist agendas, they built a movement that both ideologically and institutionally provided alternatives to traditional religion, which in its state church incarnation was often perceived as a conservative remnant of an undemocratic Ancien Régime. Since social democratic parties have decisively dominated national politics in the Nordic countries for much of the twentieth century, they have been able to both influence national identity and provide some reforms in secularist directions. Even so, what has sometimes been called a 'paradox' (Lüchau 2010) remains – namely, that the Nordic people are not religiously active but at the same time there is solid support for national churches, and the churches are involved with the state and societal institutions.

The term 'vicarious religion', coined by the sociologist of religion Grace Davie (2007), refers to the situation in which religiously passive people are happy to let specialists believe on their behalf and support the social function of churches, independently of whether they utilize services themselves. The term demonstrates the Nordic countries quite well, where the dominant churches still have solid cultural support and relatively high membership rates, combined with low participation rates and relative indifference towards church doctrines and teachings. This is compatible with the fact that the number of self-identifying atheists is significantly lower than the number of religiously unaffiliated. This is not explained by the portion of people who might be individually religious but without formal affiliation; it is more the case that people are religiously indifferent while in their cultural support of the dominant church they refrain from an atheist identification. This is further explained by the fact that in some Nordic countries, particularly in Finland, being Lutheran has been (and still is in many parts) part of the national identity. In Estonia, there has not been such a connection, which partly explains the greater number of self-identified atheists, despite the fact that atheism is also perceived as something radical in Estonia. When Finland and Sweden are compared, the higher percentage of self-identified atheists in the latter is partly explained by the fact that the atheist Soviet Union did not constitute their main 'other'. This historical aspect also clarifies why the attitude towards atheists is markedly more negative in Finland than in Sweden, even though being non-religious or religiously indifferent does not carry any major stigma in either country.

While atheist and humanist organizations are quite small in the Nordic countries and almost non-existent in the Baltic countries, Norway and Iceland are exceptions. This is primarily related to a taxation system in which dues are standardly allocated to some religious or worldview organizations. In many countries, church resignation leads to opting out of the tax payment, but in Norway and Iceland opting out is not possible. However, they allow atheists and non-religious people to choose a humanist organization over a religious one. In all countries, however, independent of the size of the organizations, they all share the attempt to further disentangle the state from the dominant church and decrease the normative bind of religion as a cultural identity.

Conclusion

The general image of the Nordic and Baltic countries as being among the most atheistic in the world is, to a large degree, accurate. However, this chapter has demonstrated that the image lacks nuance. Lithuania is quite religious, for example. And with the exception of Estonia, the national churches still play an important role in the organization of these societies. Nonetheless, unbelief, lack of religious affiliation and even atheist identification are not marginalized or considered particularly deviant. Furthermore, we have emphasized national narratives here because country-specific histories seem to be very relevant for understanding the variations of atheism. Even societies that share similar social structures, such as the Nordic welfare states, or histories as part of the Soviet Union, such as the Baltic countries, may have significant differences when it comes to atheism. Social, cultural, and political histories direct the form, role, and status that atheism has in each country and region. This is not an argument against theories that explain the popularity of atheism by referring to stages of economic welfare or modernization, but our characterization of the Nordic and Baltic countries offers a reminder of the significance of national and regional variety.

Over the past half-century or so, atheism and non-religiosity have been on the rise in the Nordic and Baltic countries, but this change is not happening equally in terms of variants, and there are differences between the countries studied here. While the number of religiously unaffiliated has risen significantly, atheist identification has increased slowly and not very dramatically. Unbelief in God is relatively steady or increasing slowly, but it is higher than in many other countries. The ties between church and state have loosened somewhat, yet they are still robust in most Nordic and Baltic countries.

Atheist and humanist organizations remain relatively unpopular and small, except in Norway and also in Iceland. The relative unpopularity depends partly on the governments' taxation systems and whether they include non-religious worldview organizations. Be that as it may, we have demonstrated here that it is important to pay attention to the national and regional histories in order to qualify and develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the idea of the 'most atheistic countries'. This also applies to those who wish to predict the future of atheism.

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United States

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The history of atheism in America as a social phenomenon paints a cyclical picture profoundly inflected by changing social contexts and media technologies. At times throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, American atheism had explosive periods enabled and defined by occasional legal victories, intellectual renaissances, organizational momentum, media exposure, and ripe sociopolitical terrain. But it also had long periods of stasis marked by repeated legal failures, organizational infighting and dissolutions, and overwhelming public opposition. Through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, American atheism repeatedly coalesced and eventually receded as a coherent and compelling collective identity as well as a widely visible social movement.

The Legacy of Freethought

At the start of the twentieth century, religious criticism and anticlericalism were largely dispersed among various organizations representing religious liberalism and humanism. America's freethought movement, which applied rational skepticism to religious theology, was well past its second golden age following the American Civil War (Warren 1966). Robert Ingersoll, famed orator, president of the American Secular Union from its formation in 1885, and the name most synonymous with postbellum American freethought, had just died in 1899. The remaining freethought movement was diffusely distributed and heavily reliant on print media, consisting largely of regional periodicals and annual conferences. Moreover, American freethought celebrated a strong sense of plurality and individualism and comprised a big tent that welcomed participation from agnostics, atheists, free religionists, spiritualists, liberal Christians, free-love advocates, and other less-well-defined identities. For the last

decades of the nineteenth century, Americans opposed to institutional religion had a number of identifiers to choose from, with terms like "liberalism," "secularism," and "infidelity" proving generally more popular than "atheism," which perhaps seemed too philosophical and esoteric for some. As the ideas of American freethought became more widely accepted in mainstream culture, the term continued to decrease in popularity after the turn of the century.

The strands of freethought that continued most directly into twentieth-century atheism were carried in large part by Emanuel (E.) Haldeman-Julius and Joseph Lewis. Born in Philadelphia in 1889, Haldeman-Julius published and sold, from 1919 to 1949, between 300 and 500 million "Little Blue Books," becoming in turn one of the most prolific publishers in American history. These cheap, half-page booklets were initially advertised to the 175,000 subscribers to *Appeal to Reason* (Girard, Kansas), which Haldeman-Julius took over in 1915. Many of the Little Blue Books were staunchly anti-religious. Booklets like "The meaning of atheism" (1931) and Bertrand Russell's "Has religion made useful contributions to society?" (1930) urged readers to abandon religion for atheism and freethought. With half a billion booklets sold in thirty years, Haldeman-Julius' publications may have constituted the most prolific distribution of information in human history at the time. When J. Edgar Hoover placed Haldeman-Julius on the FBI's enemies list after World War II due to the alleged subversive potential of the Little Blue Books, demand for the titles rapidly declined. Haldeman-Julius was convicted of tax evasion in June 1951 and he drowned the next month, marking the end of a widespread print culture around freethought.

Joseph L. Lewis, for his part, led the Freethinkers of America from 1925 until his death in 1968. During his tenure, Lewis brought various church–state lawsuits and made numerous media appearances in defense of atheism. He also spearheaded a largely successful movement to recuperate the reputation of Thomas Paine as a hero for American non-believers, founding the Thomas Paine Memorial Committee and erecting a memorial statue of Paine in Morristown, NJ in 1950 (as well as two statues in Paris, France and Thetford, England) and successfully lobbying for a US postage stamp memorializing Paine. Lewis also worked to secure the legacy of Robert Ingersoll for American atheists by restoring Ingersoll's birthplace in Dresden, NY as a museum to American freethought. The Freethinkers of America, which had boasted 30,000 members in 1935 (*Time Magazine* 1935), dissolved shortly after Lewis' death in 1968.

The Role of Humanism

Alongside the continuation of freethought, the early twentieth century saw the growth of humanism as an institutional presence. For example, Felix Adler founded the Society of Ethical Culture (SEC) out of a series of weekly lectures in 1876 and 1877. Its goal was to articulate a religion free of both ritual and doctrine and focused instead entirely on the question of morality. The SEC, which had become the Ethical Culture Society (ECS) by the turn of the century, was thus atheism-adjacent, framing disbelief as a metaphysical position irrelevant to questions of morality and rarely engaging in outright criticism of organized religion. In fact, Adler's ECS shared much in common with liberal religion, engaging seriously with questions of meaning and purpose and recognizing the importance of assembly and association. Similarly, Chicago's Hull House, founded by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in 1889, constituted a kind of civic church, engaging in social service and moral action while eschewing most explicit religious doctrines. Hull House would grow throughout the twentieth century into one of Chicago's largest nonprofit social welfare organizations, and serve as a model for other public-facing humanist organizations. Hull House also had an important influence on American philosopher John Dewey, who would go on to help shape American humanism in the twentieth century. Dewey played a particularly important role in the development of the American Humanist Association (AHA), helping draft the humanist manifesto on which the association's principles were based. The AHA developed out of the Humanist Fellowship of Chicago, formed in 1927, which had become the first national association of humanism in the United States when reincorporated as the Humanist Press Association in 1935. The Humanist Press Association was reincorporated again by Unitarian minister Curtis Reese in 1941.

These forms of religious humanism contributed to the development of American atheism in the twentieth century by helping define the liberal edge of American non-belief. Early American humanists like Adler, for example, routinely made common cause with the nascent atheism movement. At the same time, American humanism provided a home for individuals who were either uncomfortable with the public impression that atheism was too militant or who had that impression themselves. American humanism surely offered a less-confrontational position for proponents of secularism and scientific rationalism who nonetheless recoiled from philosophical atheism. At the same time, humanism in America has also maintained a population of critics of religion who can, to a greater or lesser extent, sympathize with the

goals of American atheists. In the decades following the turn of the twenty-first century, for example, the AHA has taken a more militant turn and narrowed its focus from general principles like religious freedom and international rights to the specific issue of civil rights for American non-believers, suggesting that the border between American atheism and humanism remains fluid.

Radical Leftist Political Movements

What remained of the freethought movement continued to overlap substantially with liberal religion and other social movements. As a consequence, much of the more ardent anti-religious sentiment of American freethought was folded into and subsumed by the anarchist and labor movements of the early twentieth century. Many of the most prominent advocates of radical trade unionism at the start of the century, including Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and William Haywood, were also visceral opponents of organized religion. Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, these figures and others faced a constant legal persecution that cemented a common American perception that atheism was inextricably wedded to radical leftist politics including communism and anarchism. The 1918 deportation of Goldman and Berkman, 1921 murder conviction of atheist anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, and 1926 blasphemy trial of communist Antanas/Anthony Bimba received extensive media coverage and significantly impacted public perception of American atheism for decades to come. In turn, groups like the Daughters of the American Revolution and the American Legion, as well as a diffuse coalition of Catholic and Evangelical leaders, highlighted and exaggerated the role of atheism in motivating these political threats to American civil society. Despite the steady decline of American infidelity since the late 1890s and the thriving of American Christianity through at least the first half of the twentieth century, atheism in America survived in largely spectral form, kept alive by infrequent public controversies and a persistent insistence by religious leaders that America was engaged in spiritual warfare with an atheism hell-bent on destroying American democracy (Marty 1961).

The Atheist Response to the "Great Reversal"

Sociologist David O. Moberg (1977), drawing on an idea from historian Timothy L. Smith, has noted that the period from roughly 1900 to 1930 in

America witnessed a "Great Reversal" in which American Christianity split along political lines as prominent Evangelical leaders increasingly emphasized personal salvation and biblical inerrancy over social reform and doctrinal liberalism, which had largely held sway prior to World War I. And as Christian fundamentalist opponents of modernity increasingly attacked science during the 1920s, American atheism awakened to push back. The first major indicator of this struggle was the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. High-school teacher John Scopes defied the state of Tennessee's recently enacted Butler Act, which prohibited the teaching in state-funded schools of theories that contradicted the biblical account of humankind's origin. The trial that ensued was a deliberately staged public spectacle from its beginning, pitting two of the most famous lawyers in the country – three-time presidential candidate and fundamentalist Christian leader William Jennings Bryan arguing for the prosecution and famed defense attorney and outspoken agnostic Clarence Darrow arguing for the defense – in a nationally reported referendum on science, modernity, and fundamentalist Christianity.

At least in the eyes of the public, as mediated by sensationalized media coverage, the legal issue at hand quickly took a backseat to the theological question of creationism versus Darwinian evolution. Scopes was ultimately found guilty and fined $100, with his conviction being overturned on a technicality, but both liberal secularists and conservative fundamentalists claimed victory in the court of public opinion. Northern liberals saw the trial as a humiliation of an ignorant mode of (rural) religiosity and confidently predicted the imminent triumph of secular science over organized religion. Conservative Christians saw the trial as a provocation to regroup, reorganize, and redouble efforts to systematically combat the rising tide of modernity. Christian fundamentalism began establishing powerful networks of religious schools and media platforms that would prove dominant for the next decades. The media spectacle around the trial thus had a profound impact on the future of the relationship between atheism and Christianity in America. It helped cement, in the public eye, a close association between atheism and Darwinian science. At the same time, however, Christian fundamentalists began doubling down on the latent association between atheism and communism – an association that would become increasingly damaging to public atheism in the years to come (Larson 1997).

Another event of 1925 supports the position that American atheism emerged in response to the great reversal of early twentieth-century Christianity. If we are looking for a date for the birth of American atheism

as a public movement distinct from humanism, freethought, or radical leftist political movements, we might do well to choose November 1925, when Charles Lee Smith and Freeman Hopwood founded the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism (the 4As) in New York. From 1925 to 1937, the 4As was a prominent feature of America's religious landscape. In contrast to the predominantly peace-making positions taken by freethought, Smith's approach to religion was confrontational and uncompromising. And in contrast to the arguably peripheral atheism of the communist and anarchist movements, the 4As' atheism was a primary and organizing principle. Smith's political views were hardly radical; he was more interested in promoting secularism than reforming capitalism. Smith's 4As aggressively challenged perceived violations of the Constitution's Establishment clause, advocated moral liberalism and hedonism, and attempted to thrust atheism as much as possible into public visibility. This latter aim was successful in large part owing to a controversial campaign to establish godless societies on college campuses across the country – a campaign that may have provoked the 1928 Cecil B. DeMille silent film *The Godless Girl*, which dramatized the dangers of atheism to America's youth. The 4As also organized a series of popular debates such as that between Smith and Aimee Semple McPherson on the subject of evolution at Carnegie Hall in 1934. An outspoken racist, eugenicist, and anti-Semite, Smith was forced to recede from the limelight to a degree from 1937 until his death in 1964 (Chalfant 2018; Schmidt 2018).

The legacy of both the Scopes Trial and the public controversy around Smith's 4As is a period during the 1940s and 1950s in which American Christianity swung toward conservative politics with renewed dedication. Concerns about atheism's association with radical leftist politics established in the first decades of the century reached a fever pitch during the Cold War of the 1950s, as godless communism became a perceived existential threat to the foundations of American culture. McCarthyism established atheism as roughly synonymous with communism and worked to fuse conservative Christianity with American national identity. Thus, the government inserted the phrase "under God" into the flag salute in 1954 and began printing the phrase "In God We Trust" on American paper currency beginning in 1957 – both decisions that would provoke decades of litigation by American secularists that continue into the twenty-first century. At the same time, highly influential Evangelical ministers like Billy Graham were widely successful in portraying American atheists as covert communists actively working to destroy American democracy and usher in the end

times. Atheism in America remained little more than a much-invoked but rarely substantiated bogey-person throughout the 1940s and 1950s. But atheism would emerge from the ashes of McCarthyism in the 1960s thanks in large part to Madalyn Murray O'Hair and her mastery of broadcast media.

American Atheism in the Post–Cold War Era

American atheism owes much of its success beginning in the 1960s to the rise of broadcast media. In the first case, the television coverage of the Army–McCarthy hearings of spring 1954 played a crucial role in the public humiliation of McCarthy and the political campaign that he represented. The death of McCarthyism paved the way for the gradual acceptance of religious liberalism and outright atheism in the counter-culture of the 1960s. At the same time, the rise of the broadcast media era enabled unprecedented exposure for American atheism. In contrast to the diffuse and decentralized character of nineteenth-century freethought, the expansion of television and radio around the middle of the twentieth century enabled atheists to maintain a more unified public image.

Madalyn Murray O'Hair (d.1995) is undoubtedly the most significant figure in the history of American atheism during the twentieth century's broadcast era. In 1960, Murray (who adopted the O'Hair surname in 1965) filed suit against the Baltimore Public School System for requiring her son William to participate in mandatory Bible readings. The case, *Murray v. Curlett*, would eventually be combined with a similar challenge brought in Pennsylvania, *Abington School District v. Schempp*. In its 1963 decision, the US Supreme Court effectively banned mandatory Bible recitation in public schools – a powerful legal victory for secularism and cultural victory for the atheist movement.

Immediately, American atheism was closely tied to O'Hair's notoriously outsized persona. By the time she filed suit in the Superior Court of Baltimore in December 1960, Murray had already grabbed hold of the media spotlight. The *Baltimore Sun* had published a front-page article in October detailing William and Madalyn's alleged discrimination as atheists. As the story was picked up by regional and national news outlets, Murray expertly cultivated her celebrity. By 1964, *Life* magazine famously dubbed her "The Most Hated Woman in America," a title she readily adopted throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Murray O'Hair appeared on dozens of radio and television shows – most famously the *Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* and *The Phil Donahue*

Show. In every appearance, her first priority was to proudly identify herself as an atheist.

Indeed, O'Hair's legacy in the twenty-first century consists primarily of her unfaltering commitment to popularizing the atheist label. As Frank R. Zindler, a member of the American Atheists Board of Directors and managing editor of *American Atheist* magazine, summarizes:

> She did expend great effort to desensitize the nation to the "A-word." She used the words "Atheist" and "Atheism" – capitalized, no less – over and over in every possible venue. Before Madalyn, most Atheists were afraid to use the word other than in whispers. Things are much different now, thanks to her, although I can't say the desensitization of society as a whole is yet complete. Nevertheless, Madalyn made it much safer – and much more natural – to call oneself an Atheist. (Zindler 2013, 28)

O'Hair constantly strived to project her own image as the quintessential American atheist – largely through the *American Atheist Press*, the *American Atheist Radio Series*, which broadcast to as many as 150 stations during the period 1968–77, and the *American Atheist Forum*, a cable-access show carried by as many as 140 cable television systems. O'Hair founded the organization American Atheists, which remains in the twenty-first century the most significant atheist institution in America. During her time as president from 1963 to 1986, American Atheists had chapters in twenty-eight states, established the largest archive and library of atheist literature in the world, sustained the "Dial-An-Atheist" program for informational outreach, maintained a successful Speakers' Bureau, and maintained a Sustaining Trust Fund as well as an international outreach program called United World Atheists.

Compared with previous attempts by America's religious critics to achieve public prominence, O'Hair was wildly successful in enhancing the strength and visibility of American atheism. In part, her success may have been an issue of timing; her arguments for atheism were hardly novel, but found wider acceptance alongside counter-cultural currents of the 1960s. Thus, O'Hair liked to borrow rhetorical strategies from the contemporaneous gay rights and civil rights movements, framing atheism through the lens of identity politics. Simultaneously, the ascendancy of television meant that O'Hair found radio broadcasters more interested in catering to niche audiences left out by network television programming. O'Hair thrived in formats where she could position atheism in opposition to a mainstream or dominant religious culture. In contrast to the pluralism of freethought, O'Hair regularly bemoaned the fragmentation of non-religious identity. For her, the main goal

of American atheism was to maximize the visibility of atheist identity, which meant eschewing alternative labels and "coming out" publicly as an atheist.

By the early 1980s, O'Hair's grip on the atheist movement was unraveling, owing in part to her acerbic personality. In 1980, William J. Murray, O'Hair's son and plaintiff in *Murray v. Curlett*, publicly converted to Christianity and repudiated his mother's atheism. During the 1980s, American Atheist chapter leaders called for the removal of Madalyn and her son Jon Garth Murray from power and began decamping from the organization. By the 1990s, many of American Atheists' members had abandoned the organization. On 27 August 1995, O'Hair, along with her son Jon and granddaughter Robin, disappeared along with roughly $500,000 worth of organizational funds. Their whereabouts became a public mystery for the next five years until, in 2001, David Roland Waters led investigators to the O'Hairs' bodies on a Texas ranch. Waters, a typesetter for American Atheists who had been exposed embezzling funds by Madalyn in 1995, had – along with two accomplices – kidnapped, extorted, and finally murdered the O'Hairs. For the next two decades, American atheism lay relatively dormant (Le Beau 2003).

The New Atheism

The so-called "New Atheism" that began to emerge after 2004 was not limited to the United States. The two American figures most closely associated with New Atheism – Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett – were generally less prominent than the movement's British figureheads, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Yet, New Atheism found an eager audience of both proponents and opponents in the United States by virtue of at least two major factors. The first is American Evangelicalism's long preoccupation with atheism, which ensured that the New Atheism succeeded in its goal of antagonizing a particularly fundamentalist and literalist strain of western Christianity that had already positioned itself in opposition to a perceived secularization. By actively embodying the fears long-harbored by anti-modern Christianity in America, the New Atheists found it easy to generate controversy and publicity.

The second factor that Americanized – to some extent – New Atheism was the ongoing "War on Terror" and the lasting cultural preoccupation with Islamic extremism in the United States. The New Atheists framed the September 11, 2001 terror attacks (and, to a lesser extent, the 7 July 2005 London bombings) as proof-positive of the ability of religion to promote and justify violence. In the United States, the New Atheists found an audience

who might not otherwise sympathize with the claims of atheism but who were nonetheless ready to vilify a distorted image of Islam, aided by an ongoing cultural project to justify wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In particular, American atheist Sam Harris aligned his atheism at times with the American neoconservative ambition of forcing regime change in theocratic Middle Eastern countries. Hence, New Atheism frequently faced accusations of Islamophobia from those on the political left who were unwilling to reduce the complexities of Islamic cultures to literal interpretations of the Quran or to hold the religion of Islam responsible for violence carried out in its name by a small minority.

The New Atheists quickly became popular representatives of atheist thought in the United States for the early twenty-first century, engaging in aggressive media campaigns and publishing numerous bestselling books. Intellectually, New Atheism consists largely of a marriage between the Enlightenment-style scientific rationalism found in American deism and the minoritarian identity politics championed by Madalyn Murray O'Hair and her American Atheists (LeDrew 2015). Atheists and Evangelical Christians in America understood themselves to be locked in a bitter war through the twentieth century, and so the New Atheists inherited fertile soil for an uncompromising, polemical, and aggressive form of irreligion in the twenty-first century.

American Atheism Online

In the twenty-first century, American atheism exists primarily as a virtual community. New Atheism stood out from its predecessors primarily by virtue of operating in a new media landscape. Due to simple advances in technology, New Atheism is now a uniquely digitally networked community, existing primarily on the Internet. Through new media, American atheists in the twenty-first century are able to reach a highly targeted audience and efficiently organize according to a dominant understanding of atheist identity.

Sociologists Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith (2012) have done important work in demonstrating how the mediated nature of New Atheism helps explain its use of polemic discourse, its vehement opposition to the idea of religious tolerance, and its subjective self-understanding as an embattled minority. The close reliance of New Atheism on internet culture means that the atheist identity popularized by New Atheism is one defined by simultaneous feelings of communalism and marginality. The Internet allows

atheists to feel a sense of group belonging that they might not feel in their offline worlds, but its publicity and transparency simultaneously remind them of the fact of being surrounded by a dominant religious culture. The result is that New Atheism has tended to vacillate between optimism about the strength of the atheist community as a kind of silent majority and pessimism about being stuck in a merely virtual state. New Atheism cultivated the strong sense of being an embattled minority in a predominantly Christian culture; it is perhaps this sense that makes New Atheist ideas continue to resonate with audiences in the United States, where secularization has long been framed as a battle for the soul of the nation.

The controversies faced by New Atheism since 2006 have provoked new "friendlier" forms of digital atheism. In addition to the issue of New Atheism's Islamophobia, the community has been perennially dogged by accusations of sexual harassment, racial homogeneity, and classism. These controversies, along with New Atheism's uncompromising attitude toward liberal religion, have prompted some contemporary atheist figures to advocate more accepting forms of atheism. Hemant Mehta ("the friendly atheist"), for example, has become a popular figure for those who regard New Atheism as unnecessarily hostile to religion. Likewise, Alain De Botton has influentially advocated "Atheism 2.0" as a form of disbelief that retains the positive elements of religion, like communal institutions, ritual behavior, traditional ethical principles, and subtle ideas of transcendence.

Since the emergence of New Atheism, the most significant form of atheist community in America has taken shape on the Internet. Major digital platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have thriving but porously defined atheist communities. But the largest digital community of atheists resides on reddit.com, a popular content-aggregating social platform. The community, or "subreddit," r/atheism (reddit.com/r/atheism) claims more than 2.5 million subscribers and serves as a critical hub for the broader world of digital atheism.

Institutional Irreligion in the Twenty-First Century

The twenty-first century has thus far witnessed a relative divorce between atheism as a form of self-identification and the politics of secularism. The kind of identity politics associated with Murray O'Hair's insistence that atheists come out of the closet has waned as atheists have migrated to digital media platforms where they can find a sense of belonging to a communal identity without necessarily connecting that identity to their public selves or political

activities. At the same time, secular humanism has taken up many of the more militant political and legal battles that, in the twentieth century, were more closely wedded to atheism. This is not to say that organized atheism no longer exists. Several national organizations still operate on behalf of self-identifying atheists, primarily through a network of some 1400 local and regional groups. American Atheists continues to file lawsuits around the separation of church and state – particularly concerning public displays of religious symbols – and holds an annual national convention. Having only a few thousand members, however, American Atheists remains a shadow of its former self. Since David Silverman became president in 2010, the group has largely positioned itself as a small group of incomparably dedicated militant atheists, perhaps too extreme for widespread popularity. Meanwhile, the Atheist Alliance of America (AAA) and its parent organization, Atheist Alliance International (AAI), founded in 1991, host national and international conventions and publish a biannual magazine, *Secular Nation*. Overall, however, explicitly atheist organizations have remained relatively unpopular in the twenty-first century in the United States (Meagher 2018).

At the same time, a growing number of secularist and secular humanist organizations have taken up the mantle of atheist activism (Flynn 2007; Laurence Moore and Kramnick 2018, 154–94). For example, the AHA maintains roughly 150 local affiliates and 50,000 members, but underwent a pronounced shift beginning around the time of the arrival of David Niose as president in 2009. It has since become a major player in legal battles over the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, erected numerous billboards declaring the non-existence of God, and supported the work of New Atheists like Richard Dawkins. The Center for Inquiry (CFI) was established in 1991 by Paul Kurtz to engage in broad campaigns of education and advocacy of skepticism, but shifted toward a narrower focus on atheism in the twenty-first century, serving as a major platform for the New Atheist writers and embracing their more aggressive goals and rhetoric, and finally merging with the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science in 2016.

The Secular Coalition for America (SCA), founded in 2002, claims to be the first atheist advocacy group to lobby the federal government on behalf of non-theistic Americans. Buoyed by its success in orchestrating a meeting with Obama White House staff in 2010 to discuss the concerns of its members, the SCA has since launched a "Secular Decade Project" aiming to create a national grassroots network of atheist lobbying organizations at the local level. The Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), incorporated in 1978, claims 32,000 members, pursues numerous lawsuits challenging public

displays of religion, and sponsors provocative billboard campaigns and full-page ads in prominent newspapers. Openly Secular is an organization that seeks to raise public awareness of American non-belief and to end discrimination of non-believers by encouraging atheists and agnostics to proudly identify as secular. In addition to its mission of inspiring atheists to publicly identify as such, Openly Secular encourages "Secular Values" voters to contact political representatives every year on "Openly Secular Day," currently the third Friday in October.

Intellectually, American atheism has remained relatively static since the New Atheists honed their arguments in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The New Atheists' arguments for atheism have been well-rehearsed and widely consumed through print and digital media. The official organizations that represent American non-belief do so primarily on legal, political, and cultural fronts. Legally, these groups: challenge the legitimacy of American civil religion as manifest in things like the phrases "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God we Trust" on paper currency and governmental property (Laurence Moore and Kramnick 2018, 129–53); fight for the provision of accommodations for non-believers in public institutions like prisons, workplaces, government bodies, and schools; contest the selective public display of religious symbols like the Ten Commandments on governmental property and the so-called "miracle cross" in the World Trade Center Memorial Museum; and sue the government for alleged violations of the Constitution's Establishment Clause in the declaration of religious holidays, the funding of faith-based organizations, and the provision of tax-exempt status to religious organizations. Politically, these groups directly lobby political representatives at every level of government, keep members apprised of – and motivated to address – perceived violations of the separation of church and state. Culturally, they engage in promotional campaigns to change American attitudes toward religion and toward non-believers. These campaigns include erecting billboards and purchasing newspaper and television ads that most often either dispute the claims of religion or offer sympathetic appeals to potential converts to atheism. Atheist and secularist groups have also found some success in organizing highly visible gatherings like the 2012 and 2016 Reason Rallies held in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. The 2012 Reason Rally drew tens of thousands of people and extensive media coverage, while the 2016 rally was significantly less well attended. The social phenomenon of American atheism appears again to have begun receding from public attention until its next moment in the spotlight.

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The Pacific Northwest

TINA BLOCK AND LYNNE MARKS

Introduction

"The Pacific Northwest may be called God's country," reported the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in 1991, "but no region in the nation is less religious. A national study released this week found that Oregon and Washington lead the nation with the highest proportion of non-believers" (Maier 1991, A1). More recently, in 2017, the Canadian newspaper the *National Post* reported that, based on the results of an Angus Reid survey, British Columbia (BC) is "in many respects the most godless part of Canada" (Hamilton 2017). References to the uniquely "godless" character of the Pacific Northwest are neither new nor isolated. Since the early days of European colonization, cultural and religious observers have noted the distinct secularity of the cross-border region of BC, Washington, and Oregon. Pacific Northwesterners have long been more likely than those in other regions to reject or be indifferent to religion in all of its forms, and to "live their lives as if there is no god" (Brown 2017b, 440). Associated in the early settlement era primarily with white, working-class men, this regional secularity evolved over time to become, by the postwar era, a more broadly based, entrenched element of Pacific Northwest culture and identity. This chapter traces the evolution of this regional phenomenon from the 1880s through to the turn of the twenty-first century. It suggests that while the nature and scope of Pacific Northwest secularity changed over time, the region was and remains at the forefront of secularizing trends in North America.

Roots of a Secular Culture, 1880–1914

While the early settler Pacific Northwest is known for the early missionaries who came out to try to convert the Indigenous peoples of the region to Christianity, it is also known for its godlessness. Most late nineteenth- and

early twentieth-century North Americans were very Christian. People were expected to attend church, ideally every Sunday. Although many did not live up to that standard, at least an occasional appearance in church was necessary if you wanted to be identified as a respectable member of the community. Christian faith was also a central part of how most people understood their worlds. If you said you were an atheist, or had no religion, you could lose your job, your friends, or your community. Being an atheist put you beyond the pale of acceptable society in most of North America. But this was much less true in the Pacific Northwest.

A common nineteenth-century saying asserted that men "left God behind" when they crossed the Rocky Mountains into BC. We know more about irreligion in BC than in Washington or Oregon, because the Canadian census asked about religious belief, while the ostensible separation of church and state in the United States meant that this was not possible there. In 1901, about 2 percent of British Columbians were willing to say that they were atheists or had no religion. This may seem low to us, but it was ten times higher than the percentage of Canadians overall who were willing to define themselves as godless in this way. In 1901 BC had only 3 percent of the population of Canada, but this population included 30 percent of all Canadians willing to tell the census-taker that they were atheists, infidels, agnostics, or had no religion. Most of those willing to call themselves atheists were part of the white settler population. Most Indigenous people had been at least ostensibly converted to Christianity by this time, and those who had not been converted tended to be defined on the census by the pejorative term "pagans." Census-takers knew very little about the Asian population of the province, but most were defined as Confucians, Buddhists, or "heathens" (Marks 2017).

In addition to those of the white settler population willing to call themselves atheists or of no religion, a much higher proportion of them may have called themselves Methodists or Baptists on the census, but never went near the churches. This was true in Oregon and Washington as well as in BC. Church membership rates lagged significantly behind the rest of the United States and Canada. In 1890, 22 percent of Oregon's population were church members, as were 16.4 percent of Washington's, as compared to 34.4 percent of the population who were church members across the United States. The divisions between British Columbian and Canadian church membership rates were at least equally wide (Killen and Silk 2004).

Church leaders were well aware of this issue. At a Christian symposium in the American Pacific Northwest in 1914, one participant noted that "In the

East they were faithful church members. Here they are not even church [at]tenders," while another observed that "only a small proportion of our people really attend church" (Little and Stuart 2008 [1915], 259, 263). A Presbyterian missionary in BC lamented in 1899 that: "[T]he great mass of the people care nothing for the gospel and treat all church organizations with supreme indifference" (Marks 2017).

Ministers and Christian laypeople often complained about the lack of Sabbath observance in the region. Jessie McQueen, a Nova Scotian who emigrated to BC in the late 1880s to teach, complained to her mother about the "handful of people" who gathered for church services in the Nicola Valley where she was teaching, and complained about how "Sundays are so different here," with most people ignoring any sort of Sabbath observance. Another complaint from Jessie, that she was "so sick of the faces of men" in the community where she was teaching, provides insight into the more irreligious nature of the Pacific Northwest.

Throughout North America in this period, women were much more likely to be religious and interested in churchgoing than men. At the same time in the Pacific Northwest, white settler women were very much outnumbered by white settler men. In BC approximately 70 percent of the non-Indigenous population was male in 1901 and 1911. In 1900, almost 60 percent of the non-Indigenous population of Washington State was male, as was 56 percent of the non-Indigenous population of Oregon. These men came west to find jobs, and ideally to make their fortunes in the resource industries of the region. They were either young and unmarried, or often had left their wives behind in the east. In leaving their families, they often left the churches they had attended with mothers and wives. As Jimmy White, a prospector in late nineteenth-century BC noted, "I quit altogether. I never went inside none of the damn churches after I get away from the East." White was typical of many men throughout the Pacific Northwest (Marks 2017).

This attitude was most prevalent in the resource sector, especially in mining and logging camps, which included a particularly high number of those willing to call themselves atheists or say they had no religion. In Slocan, a major mining town in the interior of BC, over 7 percent of the inhabitants defined themselves as atheists or as having "no religion" in 1901, as did almost 4 percent of the inhabitants of the nearby mining town of Rossland, at a time when about 2 percent of British Columbians defined themselves this way, and about 0.15 percent of Canadians. While we do not have comparable statistics for the United States, it is instructive that while Americans composed 10 percent of the population of BC, in 1901 30 percent of the atheists and

those of "no religion" in BC were from the United States. Many were miners or loggers who regularly crossed the border in search of work. British Columbian missionaries complained that "in the mining districts the influence of immigrants from the United States is, as a rule disastrous to religion and morals, and this is the preponderant influence in these districts." Missionaries argued that these people came from "the churchless, irreligious communities that have been such a source of anxiety and grief to the earnest-minded Christians of the American Republic." These would have been Americans from the Pacific Northwest (Marks 2017).

The culture of the mining regions certainly reinforced an anti-religious worldview. In the Kootenay mountains of BC, a few popular atheist journalists were particularly influential. The most famous was Robert Lowery, who published a range of newspapers throughout the Kootenays in the early twentieth century. *Lowery's Claim* was particularly infamous for its attacks on religion. In the *Claim*, Lowery regularly insulted ministers and liked to compare religion to insanity or drunkenness. For example: "Religion, like old whisky, is not so bad when you only get a taste of it occasionally. But when you fill upon it until it slobbers out of your mouth at every step the evil effects of the jag become apparent. Thousands are addicted to it ... Religious intoxication in the past has flooded the world with misery." In addition to his own anti-religious writings, Lowery regularly published freethought reprints, such as one that declared that the character of God is "simply revolting," and condemned the Bible's "foolishness, immorality and obscenity."

Lowery was very sympathetic toward the miners who eagerly bought his papers, but he was not a socialist. However, because of the brutal working conditions in mining and logging in the Pacific Northwest, and the stark divisions between employers and workers, socialism was popular among a significant proportion of workers. The Western Federation of Miners, which included many members on both sides of the border, was a socialist union. While the majority of radical unionists and socialists in the eastern United States and Canada remained Christians, this was less true on the Pacific Coast, where a pure Marxism that rejected religion as the "opium of the masses" was more popular. This was particularly evident in the pages of the *Western Clarion*, the paper of the Socialist Party of BC. In one of its many anti-religious commentaries, the *Clarion* noted that: "In spite of pretense of spirituality the church is as grossly material as any other human institution. Its tap root runs deep down into the plunder that is wrung from the toil and sweat of an enslaved working class." A number of missionaries acknowledged

that in some mining and logging camps in the Pacific Northwest there was no point in going to try to convert men because "rabid socialism" prevailed (Marks 2017).

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a syndicalist union movement, was another anti-capitalist and anti-religious movement popular in the Pacific Northwest. The IWW sought to organize both skilled and, most particularly, unskilled workers to improve conditions and ultimately to challenge the capitalist system through the weapon of the general strike. It was very active in organizing miners, loggers, and other workers across the Pacific Northwest in the early twentieth century. The *Industrial Worker*, an IWW paper published out of Spokane, Washington from 1909 to 1913, was a major source of IWW news and rhetoric. Religion was not the main focus of the IWW, but while the *Industrial Worker* and various IWW leaders were willing to acknowledge Jesus as a positive role model who challenged the authorities of his day who oppressed the poor, they were very critical of organized Christianity, seeing churches and ministers as on the side of exploitative employers. The IWW songs, which spread their message far more effectively than any newspaper, used the tunes of many gospel hymns to preach a very different message. One of their most famous songs, "The Preacher and the Slave," included the following well-known response from a minister to hungry workers:

> You will eat, bye and bye/In that glorious land above the sky;
> Work and pray, live on hay/You'll get pie in the sky when you die.

While not all workers in the Pacific Northwest were anti-religious syndicalists or socialists, many others also had little reason to be positive about the churches. They worked hard in mostly male environments, and when they had leisure time, most wanted to relax through "rough" leisure activities – drinking, gambling, and visiting sex workers. This was certainly preferred to going to church. British Columbian church leaders wanted to blame Americans in their province for being "the pronounced champions and devotees of gambling, drinking and Sabbath desecration," but such patterns were common on both sides of the border in the Pacific Northwest.

Church leaders were appalled by what they saw as total immorality in many Pacific Northwest towns and cities, and tried to get laws passed to limit drinking and eliminate gambling and the sex trade. They also tried to have laws passed preventing various forms of leisure on Sundays. This obviously didn't make the miners, loggers, and other working-class men happy with the

churches that were trying to limit their leisure options. Robert Lowery was particularly outspoken on this issue. In his *Claim*, he attacked the churches for trying to pass:

> stringent and obnoxious laws in regard to the observance of Sunday. If not put in asylums or made to close their valves by public opinion the Sunday fiends will stab liberty and freedom to a sickly finish, and fill any land with gloom, misery, and curses against one of the last efforts of dying theology to keep the rope around the human race with the absurd argument that oppression and persecution is the way to glorify God. (Marks 2017)

While mining towns were considered particularly immoral and irreligious, such patterns were also common in larger cities like Seattle and Vancouver, where loggers and other out-of-work laborers would often congregate, and where religious reformers saw much scope for their efforts. While some neighborhoods in both cities included many churchgoers, others did not. In Vancouver, the large low-income area of Gastown was home to many transient, single, working-class men who much preferred the bars to the churches. In 1901, 8.8 percent of Gastown inhabitants defined themselves to the census-taker as atheists, agnostics, or of no religion. This was a higher proportion than in the most godless mining regions of BC, and was fifty times greater than the proportion of the population defining themselves as irreligious in Canada as a whole.

Some Vancouver atheists attended the secularist-rationalist lectures offered in Vancouver in 1914. From April until well into the fall of that year, Sam Atkinson, a former clergyman and member of the executive of the Pacific Coast Rationalist Association, addressed "the largest Rationalist audience in Canada" every Sunday evening in Vancouver's Globe Theatre. Atkinson and other members of the Rationalist Association argued against the legitimacy of religion on the basis of rational, scientific principles. Atkinson briefly published the *Vancouver Rationalist* in 1914, a journal that challenged Christianity and the churches, as well as espousing rights for women and a more cooperative vision of society. Atkinson and other lecturers of the Pacific Coast Rationalist Association also lectured in cities and towns in the American Pacific Northwest and California. In August of 1914 another lecturer, C. T. Spalding of the National Rationalist Association, which had branches across the United States, spoke to a Vancouver audience "largely composed of men" about "The Conflict between Science and Religion." Spalding was apparently "well known all down the Pacific Coast to be a keen and effective speaker." He no doubt spoke to rationalist societies

in the American Pacific Northwest, such as the Portland Rationalists, who met Sunday mornings in the local public library, and who in the spring of 1914 protested the fact that "Go-to-Church Sunday" was being announced at the local public schools (*Oregonian*, 16 April 1914, 10).

While anti-religious leaders and journalists can be seen as positive precursors to a more rational, secular world, there was a darker side to anti-religious sentiment in the Pacific Northwest in this period. Anti-religious journalists like Lowery wrote in very gendered terms, denouncing clergymen as unmanly men and "cissies," and women as weak-minded victims of the churches. Racism was also very much part of the freethought message, at least among some of its advocates.

Anti-Asian racism was endemic on the Pacific Coast. The United States passed the Asian Exclusion Act in 1882, barring further Chinese immigration to the United States. Canada did not pass a similar law until 1923, but in this period Asian immigrants both in BC and the broader Pacific Northwest faced virulent racism, including exclusion from many jobs and frequent beatings and other physical harassment.

Christian missionaries were among the few white settlers who took an interest in Chinese immigrants, as they sought to convert them to Christianity. While many Christian ministers were as racist as other white settlers, some of the missionaries in Canada were more sympathetic to the Chinese, and opposed racism and Chinese exclusion. This did not make them popular with those who saw themselves as representing the working class, including many irreligious working-class men and at least some of their leaders.

Robert Lowery, the irreligious newspaper editor of the Kootenays, who was already hostile to the churches, was also very hostile to the Chinese, and accepted the white working-class racist rhetoric of the Chinese taking the jobs of white workers. The opposition of at least some churchmen to Chinese exclusion, in part because they wanted to convert Chinese immigrants to Christianity, made Lowery very hostile to these churchmen; he wrote:

> These fools [ministers], mad with a desire to pound their iron-clad creed into anything would sacrifice all this glorious Dominion for the sake of holding up a Presbyterian Christ to the moon-eyed gaze of the Yellow Curse. They would make Canada a place for slaves and masters. They would force poor men in to the ranks of criminals or over the dump of starvation.

Other irreligious working-class leaders wrote similarly, while ministers to working-class congregations in BC told their superiors that when the church

in eastern Canada passed resolutions in support of Chinese rights, that it made it harder for them to attract white working-class parishioners.

The deep racial divides in BC, reflecting virulent anti-Asian and also anti-Indigenous racism, also allowed white, working-class men to define their identities primarily through their race, through a shared sense of whiteness. Christian affiliation and involvement were much less important to male respectability and social inclusion on the west coast than was the case in the east, giving white working-class men more freedom to reject or ignore religion, Christianity, and the churches (Marks 2017).

In the late nineteenth century, the secularity of the Pacific Northwest took firm root, associated primarily with the white working-class settler men who made up the majority of the white population. White settler women, both middle and working class, were much more likely to be affiliated with the churches than their male counterparts, seeking faith and comfort through the familiarity of the churches in a rough and foreign land. At the same time, more white settler women remained outside of the churches, or even defined themselves as atheists or as having no religion, than was true of their counterparts in the east. Most of these women were the wives or daughters of atheist men, or men of no religion. While they were a minority among the irreligious of the Pacific Northwest in these early years, the families they created would form a significant strand of a growing secular culture in the Pacific Northwest.

Change and Continuity: The War and Interwar Eras, 1914–45

In the immediate pre-war and war years, increasing numbers of missionaries and ministers found that workers in the Pacific Northwest would have nothing to do with them. They blamed several sources for this change, including the IWW, with its hostility to religion, and "socialist Finns" and other working-class Scandinavian immigrants who spurned religion and were immigrating to BC in growing numbers. The churchmen also suggested that this attitude revealed the emergence of a new generation, which was being raised with no religious training at all. In 1912, the Methodist superintendent of missions in BC, Reverend J. H. White, wrote:

> A few years ago though men might be very rough and even dissipated they had a background of Christian training and tradition to which appeal could

> be made. A new generation is grown up who have been trained in a different school. There is little use appealing to a man to remember his mother's prayers and his father's God if his mother never prayed and his father scouted [dismissed] religion (Marks 2017, 98–9).

Children raised in such irreligious families can be found across the Pacific Northwest from the early twentieth century. At least some children of committed socialist atheists of the pre-war period maintained their parents' allegiances, and those raised in religiously indifferent households also had little interest in religion. One man, born in Oregon in the 1940s, was raised by irreligious parents whose own parents (born in the Pacific Northwest around 1900) had been "both anti-theist . . . [and] anti-religious" their whole lives. In working-class families it was often the fathers and grandfathers who were profoundly anti-religious, as was the case with a Puget Sound family in which over several generations the men were "kind of famously hilariously irreligious . . . offensively anti-church," while the women continued to attend church. Increasingly in the interwar years, particularly in Washington and Oregon, it also became more acceptable for more educated middle-class families to reject religion. These families, both husbands and wives, rejected the anti-scientific, anti-evolution bias of an emerging Christian fundamentalism. The fact that 30 percent of the students at the University of Washington in 1936 did not express any religious preference is telling in this regard (Block and Marks, forthcoming; *Seattle Times,* 1 December 1936, 4).

While atheism gained greater acceptance across the United States in these years, particularly among the more educated, it very much remained a minority culture. Church membership rates remained lowest in the American Pacific Northwest, but even in this region those acknowledging that they were atheists or agnostics remained a small minority. The emergence of Gallup Polls in the early 1940s revealed that this region had the lowest proportion of people in the United States to assert a belief in God, at 93 percent vs 96 percent nationally, and the lowest proportion to claim to believe in life after death, at 63 percent vs 76 percent nationally (Gallup 1972, 473–4).

In BC the irreligious population did not grow during these decades. After increasing between 1901 and 1911, the percentage of British Columbians who defined themselves as atheists/agnostics or as having no religion declined to 1901 levels in 1921 and fell a bit further in 1931, although still remaining five times higher than in the rest of Canada. In absolute numbers, the irreligious population remained stable between 1911 and 1931.

Since most of the irreligious in the pre-war years had been men, the slight decline in the proportion of those of "no religion" during the interwar years may reflect the evening out of gender ratios in BC, as well as the patriotic religiosity of the war years. The emergence and growing popularity of conservative evangelical movements in BC also had an impact. Christianity may have strengthened its power and appeal in the interwar years, but the irreligious did not disappear and their children were less likely to turn to religious belief and practice (Marks 2017, 218–20).

Whereas the gender imbalance that fueled BC secularism may have diminished after World War I, the radical working-class tradition that also fostered it remained very much alive. Particularly in the Depression years, BC communist leaders gained a major following among the many unemployed, and a number of socialist and communist leaders in BC were committed to atheism. The links between socialism and atheism are apparent in the creation of a secularist group in Vancouver in 1923, the Canadian Secularist Society. The society's emergence was noted in the BC Socialist paper, the *Western Clarion*, which announced that "As elsewhere the special object of this [society] is, to study religion in the light of Science and materialistic [Marxist] philosophy." Readers of the *Clarion* were invited to attend and "assist in this work." One of the organizers, and a speaker at one of their meetings, was a socialist activist, the "Red Dentist" W. J. Curry, who spoke on evolution. It is unclear whether the emergence of a rationalist society in December 1924 in Victoria also had socialist links (*Western Clarion*, 16 May 1923, 4; *Victoria Colonist*, 2 December 1924, 7; Hanowski 2018).

Links between socialism and atheism could also be found in the American Pacific Northwest. A colorful Portland activist, Tom Burns, defined himself as a socialist in the pre-war years, when he was also active in the IWW. In the 1920s and 1930s he retained his vocal support for the rights of the working class, but became more active in the cause of atheism. Burns published a range of pamphlets attacking the Bible and other Christian beliefs and lauding the teachings of Robert Ingersoll. In 1925 Burns challenged Billy Graham to debate him on the subject that "Resolved: American Penitentiary records prove that Christians are more dishonest, criminal and immoral than Freethinkers," although the popular evangelist did not take him up on the challenge (Tom Burns records, Oregon Historical Society; Sleeth 2011).

There were occasional letters to the editors by atheists, as well as hostile responses from Christians, throughout the Pacific Northwest in this period. However, in the spring and summer of 1931 the *Seattle Times* experienced

what one unhappy Christian referred to as a "pest of atheists" writing to the paper, and receiving often vitriolic responses from churchgoers. One of these "locusts" was clearly both a socialist and an atheist, while others focused primarily on attacking Christianity on rationalist grounds, challenging the legitimacy of the Bible and other Christian beliefs, attacking Christians for denying evolution and for oppressing women. A number of these writers also sought to keep religion out of the public schools. All of these elements of the freethought debate were not unique to Depression-era Seattle atheists – these arguments could be heard across North America in this period, and extended back to the nineteenth century and forward to today. Nonetheless, the Pacific Northwest continued in this period, and beyond, to be particularly fertile ground for these and other atheist "pests" (*Seattle Times*, 2 May 1931, 6; 4 June 1931, 6; 11 July 1931, 6; 24 July 1931; 5 August 1931, 6; 29 August 1931, 6; 31 August 1931, 6).

A Regional Secular Culture Emerges, 1945–80

In the years following World War II, secularizing currents in the Pacific Northwest deepened, and irreligion became ever more embedded in the region's culture. One of Canada's most prominent atheists during the post-war era was a woman named Dr. Marian Sherman, who resided in Victoria, BC. In 1946, Sherman, who was a dedicated Anglican and former medical missionary, was looking out the window of her Victoria home when she came to the sudden realization that "there really was no personal God." Virtually overnight, the fifty-four-year old Sherman went from being a devoted churchgoer to a vocal proponent of non-belief. From the time of her so-called "wrong-way conversion" in 1946 to her death in 1975, Sherman actively encouraged her friends and family members to shed their religious beliefs, promoted atheism within the media, played a lead role in establishing the secular humanist movement in Canada, and became, in the words of one journalist, the "No. 1 atheist in the West."

As an older, upper-middle-class woman, Sherman did not conform to the conventional image of radical atheism, which continued to be associated with young, working-class men. Indeed, her atheism often met with incredulity. She said: "Because I'm not a moral degenerate people keep saying to me 'You *can't* be an atheist.' When I insist that I am, they reply 'You're not. I don't believe you.'" Sherman was unique in the militance of her non-belief, and in her commitment to actively propagating atheism to those within her community and beyond (Block 2014; Fraser 1965). However, her story appears less

unusual when we consider the highly secular context within which it unfolded. By the postwar era, the Northwest's distinct secularity was clearly apparent not only among single, working-class men in resource towns, but also among women, families, and middle-class communities across the region (Block 2016).

The most striking aspect of Pacific Northwest secularity in the postwar years was the region's continuing unusually low levels of affiliation with, and involvement in, organized religion, particularly institutional Christianity. As in earlier periods, in the postwar era British Columbians were more likely than those in other provinces to claim that they had no religion. For instance, in 1971, 13.1 percent of British Columbians professed to have no religion, compared to 4.3 percent of Canadians (Census of Canada). Levels of no religion, which were higher in BC than all other provinces, generally decreased from west to east across the country. In 1971, residents of BC were approximately two times more likely than those in Alberta to claim no religion, almost three times more likely than those in Ontario, over five times more likely than those in Nova Scotia, and a striking thirty-two times more likely than those in Newfoundland.

Levels of church affiliation and attendance were also comparatively low in BC through the postwar years. For instance, in 1956, 61 percent of Canadians claimed weekly church attendance, compared to only 31 percent in BC. South of the border, the churches were also far emptier in Washington and Oregon than in other parts of the country. Church membership studies conducted in 1952 and 1971, along with a range of other surveys from the era, show that Washington and Oregon had the lowest church membership rates among all states by a wide margin. In 1971 the church membership rate for the Pacific Northwestern states hovered around 33 percent compared to around 50 percent for the nation. There is a dearth of state-level data from that era on levels of religious preference and church attendance. Nevertheless, several surveys indicate that residents of the broadly defined region of the American West were more likely than those elsewhere to claim no religious preference and to stay away from the churches (Block 2016).

Pacific Northwesterners were uniquely detached from organized religion, and became even more so during the 1960s and 1970s, a time of increasing dechristianization across both nations. A growing counterculture and widespread critique of established Christianity fueled the growing exodus from the churches, particularly among the young (Block 2019). Unfortunately, there are scant statistics that explicitly address atheism or unbelief in that time period, particularly at the regional level. Earlier

we saw that a 1944 Gallup Poll showed slightly lower levels of belief in God and in life after death in the Pacific region than nationally. While religious views were regularly surveyed by Gallup, such surveys only very occasionally accounted for regional differences. Gallup Polls conducted during the postwar decades do show that, at the national level, sharp declines in organized religious involvement were not matched by similarly sharp declines in religious belief. According to a 1947 Gallup Poll, 95 percent of Canadians, and 94 percent of Americans, claimed to believe in a God. By the mid-1970s, the percentage remained stable in the United States, but had dropped to 89 percent in Canada (Gallup 1972, 698; Gallup 1985, 10). A National Opinion Research Center study of 1972 found that 81 percent of residents of the Pacific region claimed to "believe in the existence of God as I define Him," compared to 84 percent of Americans more generally (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 79). Despite the lack of adequate direct statistics on unbelief at the regional level, we do know that the proportion of religious "nones," or people who claimed to have "no religion," was (and is) uniquely large in the Pacific Northwest. Religious "nones" were not necessarily all atheists or unbelievers, but they were more apt than others to be indifferent or hostile to religion.

The postwar Pacific Northwest was distinctly non-religious, but it was not a region filled with militant atheists or even those who were openly non-believing. The region was comparatively irreligious, and the postwar era was a time of increasing secularization; however, even within this relatively secular context, cultural pressures to believe, and a stigma against unbelief, persisted. Given this, it is especially important to broaden our conceptualization of unbelief to include those who were indifferent to or dismissive of religion, even if they did not claim, or give voice to, an atheist or non-believing identity (Brown 2017a). Through her atheist activism, Marian Sherman discovered that many people across both BC and Canada kept their questioning or rejection of religious belief to themselves, not even sharing such thoughts with close family members. Sherman was regularly interviewed by the media, and in response to such interviews she received hundreds of letters from atheists and unbelievers across Canada and beyond who praised her courage in speaking out and admitted that they kept quiet about their unbelief for fear of losing jobs and of alienating friends and family. This had not changed much since the nineteenth century. During the 1960s, one letter-writer referred to Canadian atheists as largely a "silent party," while another noted that they were compelled to "hold their tongue" about their unbelief so as not to risk social disapproval or ostracism (Block 2014).

In that same time period, North American secular humanist organizations, which espoused rationalism and rejected supernatural beliefs, reported instances of discrimination against atheists and the persistent stigma against non-belief. While such stigma was evident on both sides of the border, it was especially apparent in the United States where, compared to Canada, Christianity was more dominant and atheism more deeply associated with communism. Even within the secularizing, counter-cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s, positive or even neutral stories about atheism or unbelief were rare to encounter in the media of both nations. Oral history interviews with Pacific Northwesterners who were teens or young adults during that era further point to the silence and stigma around non-belief and to the absence of atheist role models. Young people who doubted or denied religious belief were apt to ignore or dismiss religion rather than to openly embrace atheist identities. For many, the loss of religious beliefs was, as one interviewee put it, a "gradual kind of wearing away," and often involved long periods of neither thinking about nor engaging with religion. In the postwar years, atheism remained on the margins of the Pacific Northwest, but living without religion had become widely accepted and indeed normative in the region (Block 2016; 2019).

Although irreligion became more widespread in the Pacific Northwest in the years following World War II, it retained some hints of its earlier characteristics, particularly its association with white, working-class men. The postwar era saw a decline in institutionalized racism, as blatantly racist laws were challenged and, in many cases, overturned. Nevertheless, racism and racial cleavages persisted, and race continued to outweigh religion in defining difference and identity in the region. Not only were whites over-represented among the irreligious, but the very notion of secularity – and particularly the freedom to be religiously uninvolved – came increasingly to be entwined with regional, frontier ideals of the Pacific Northwest, which were underscored by assumptions of whiteness (Block 2016).

Like race, class continued to shape this regional secularity. Through the postwar years, secular humanist organizations in Canada and the United States mainly attracted educated, middle-class professionals to their ranks (Block 2016; Pasquale 2007). Moreover, the religious "nones" tended to be overrepresented among educated professionals and those in the higher-income categories. There seems to have been a somewhat different pattern in the Pacific Northwest. Gallup Polls from that era show that people of no religion who lived in the broadly defined region of the American West were less concentrated in business and professional occupations, and had slightly

lower incomes, than those in other regions. In Canada, the 1971 census indicates that British Columbians of no religion were less concentrated in the upper income brackets than their counterparts in other provinces. In the postwar era, irreligion seems to have been more evenly dispersed across all income and educational groups, and more linked to long-standing, working-class traditions, in the Pacific Northwest than elsewhere (Block 2016). That pattern has held true in BC but not in the American Northwest; recent evidence indicates that, today, people of "no religion" in Washington and Oregon are, like their national counterparts, apt to be more educated and have higher incomes than the religiously affiliated (Block and Marks, forthcoming).

High population mobility, a contributing factor in the initial establishment of irreligion in the region during the early settlement era, remained important through the postwar years. In 1952, the author of an article in the *Lutheran*, a magazine of the United Lutheran Church of America, remarked on the strikingly low levels of church involvement in the Pacific Northwest. Attributing this phenomenon, in part, to the transience of the region's population, the author concluded:

> by cold and indisputable statistics a family moving to this region runs greater risk of losing its connection with the church, and of having its faith in God sicken and die, than it would anywhere else in the United States. (It should be pointed out that for Canada somewhat the same conditions prevail in British Columbia, which is also a part of the Pacific Synod.)
>
> (Bracher and Bracher 1952, 14)

Hyperbole aside, these authors were apt in pointing to the secularizing effects of Pacific Northwest culture, and to the connection between mobility and irreligion. More people moved to and within the Pacific Northwest than elsewhere; while moving did not invariably lead to irreligion, it often separated one from family ties – ties that were, in many cases, key to motivating continued involvement and interest in religion. Also, by the postwar era, the Pacific Northwest's entrenched secular culture would have been difficult to ignore by, and likely exerted some influence over, newcomers to the region. At the same time, the region's secular culture was not solely a product of a transient population. It was also, as we have seen, reproduced over time by and within families that had deep roots in the region and long-standing traditions of irreligion (Block 2016; Block and Marks, forthcoming).

Marian Sherman's open affirmation of her unbelief and active promotion of atheism made her an outlier. However, in turning away from the church

and living a life without religion, she was like many others in the postwar Pacific Northwest. When she sat looking out of the window of her Victoria home and made the decision to reject religion, she did so from within a city, province, and wider region where religious non-involvement was the norm. From its beginnings in the early settlement era, the Northwest's distinct secularity had evolved over time to become, by the 1970s, an entrenched element of the regional culture. Although the silencing and stigmatization of atheism and unbelief persisted, growing numbers of Northwesterners stayed away from the churches and ignored religion – and did so quite comfortably and without fear of social reprisal.

Through the postwar era, cultural and religious observers regularly attributed the relative lack of religious engagement in the Pacific Northwest to the lure of the outdoors and the natural beauty of the region. For instance, a 1977 article in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported, matter-of-factly, that the "state of Washington never has been a land of milk and honey for its churches," a situation the author characterized as a case of "God Vs. Outdoors" (Connelly 1977, A1). Certainly, it was (and is) true that many residents of BC and the American Northwest preferred spending time in nature rather than the churches. However, while the appeal of nature and the outdoors is strong in the region, it is not somehow inherently stronger than in other places. What *is* distinct about the region is the extent to which its residents have come, over time, to accept and even to prize religious non-involvement, seeing it as central to the Northwest lifestyle. In the postwar years, the region's irreligion retained some of its earlier characteristics, including its association with population mobility, whiteness, and the working classes. At the same time, by that era the Pacific Northwest's distinct secularity had become more broadly based and was evident not only among single, transient men in resource towns, but among all demographic groups, including women, middle-class families, and even "sweet gray-haired grandmothers" like Marian Sherman (Fraser 1965; Block 2014).

Consolidating a Secular Culture, 1980–2001

The unique irreligion of the Pacific Northwest persisted through the final two decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. In the early 2000s, one Seattle reporter declared that in "the Pacific Northwest, we're the most irreligious folks in America," while a Victoria journalist affirmed that having "no religion is still the No. 1 religion in BC" (Lazaruk and Greenaway 2003, A1; Berger 2004, 9). By that time period, levels of professed belief in God had

further declined across Canada, and remained lower in BC than in other provinces. An Angus Reid survey conducted in 2000 indicated that 84 percent of Canadians claimed to believe in God, compared to 75 percent of British Columbians. The American Religious Identification Survey of 2001 showed that residents of Washington and Oregon were somewhat more apt than their national counterparts to reject belief in God. At the same time, levels of professed religious belief remained well over 90 percent in Washington, Oregon, and across the United States during that era (Pasquale 2007; Killen and Silk 2004). Although few were professed non-believers, residents of the American Northwest were increasingly apt to consider themselves secular and to live their lives without religion.

Religious detachment and disinterest remained characteristic of life on both sides of the border and continued to distinguish the Pacific Northwest from other regions. For instance, in 2001, 14.1 percent of Americans and 16 percent of Canadians claimed to have no religion, compared to 21 percent of Oregonians, 25 percent of Washingtonians, and a striking 35 percent of British Columbians (Pasquale 2007; Census of Canada). Interestingly, while the Pacific Northwest became more secular during the latter two decades of the twentieth century, the religious "nones" population actually grew at a greater rate in other regions. For instance, while British Columbians were over ten times more likely than other Canadians to claim no religion in 1901, and three times more likely to do so in 1971, by 2001 they were about twice as likely (Census of Canada). The narrowing of this gap suggests that the Pacific Northwest, once a clear outlier, was in fact at the forefront of secularizing trends that have become increasingly prevalent across North America.

As we have seen, since the early settlement era, much of the inculcation and reproduction of these secularizing trends occurred at the level of the household, within Pacific Northwest families. While it was always important in the region, irreligious socialization within the family became even more powerful and apparent within the increasingly secular context of the late twentieth century. As sociologists have shown, the passing on of irreligion within the family is especially impactful when reinforced by a broader society that is, itself, increasingly secular (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017). By the final two decades of the twentieth century, many Pacific Northwest families had been secular for several generations, and irreligion – often in the form of religious indifference – was for many a deeply embedded, long-standing family tradition. In a recent interview, a woman from Vancouver, BC, characterized the secularity of her family matter-of-factly as "just the way we've been for a long time."

In teaching children to be secular, women, as mothers, continued to be central; women were still less likely than men to reject religion, but gendered differences in irreligion were less apparent by the late twentieth century as ideals of feminine and motherly piety receded. Marian Sherman once proudly remarked that her grandchildren were being raised as "unbaptized, happy little heathens" (Fraser 1965, 7). It may be that Sherman explicitly taught her stepdaughter, who she described as a "freethinker," to reject religion and adopt atheism. More commonly, however, parents passed on irreligion to their children by example – such as ignoring or critiquing religion within the home – rather than explicit teaching. Recent research suggests that the national border makes a difference to patterns of religious and irreligious transmission within families. Today, religious "nones" in BC are less likely than their counterparts in the American Northwest to have received religious socialization as children (Block and Marks, forthcoming).

Due perhaps to the growing prevalence of irreligious socialization as well as to declining fears of atheistic communism, by the 1980s the stigma against unbelief and atheism had waned considerably in the Pacific Northwest. In recent interviews, many Pacific Northwesterners recall that it became easier, over time, to voice their unbelief. Born in 1956 in Chilliwack, BC, Jim (pseudonym) never believed in God but found that he was only able to admit that publicly once he was older. He said: "I think when I was younger I was a little bit afraid to say out loud that I was atheist or, you know, to adamantly say that there is no God, but I think I am just more sure of it now at this point in my life." Other interviewees also described becoming more comfortable over time in acknowledging and expressing their atheism and unbelief. While this growing comfort and confidence was likely gained through age and experience, it was also influenced by the increasing openness to, and tolerance of, unbelief in late twentieth-century Pacific Northwest society. Such openness was more apparent in the larger cities than in smaller towns and rural areas of the Pacific Northwest, and in BC than in Washington and Oregon. In the American Northwest, powerful national norms that extolled religious belief and denigrated atheism continue to hold at least some sway, even today (Schmidt 2016; Block 2019).

Conclusion

Since the early days of European colonization, BC, Washington, and Oregon have comprised a distinctly secular region. Those who resided in the Pacific Northwest have long been more likely than others to ignore or reject

religion, in all of its forms, and to "live their lives as if there is no God." With origins in the white, working-class, male culture that took root in the early settlement era, the Pacific Northwest's unique secularity changed over time to become more widespread, broadly based, and central to the region's culture and identity. Irreligion was reproduced and normalized within Northwest families, a process which also helped, over time, to lessen the stigma attached to atheism. While the proportion of Northwesterners claiming unbelief or atheism has grown over the years, particularly in BC, this was and is not a region composed entirely of professed non-believers. The evolving secular culture of the Pacific Northwest involved everything from active atheism to religious indifference, and was created and sustained not only by those who claimed atheist or non-believing identities, but also by those who disregarded or dismissed religion and gave little thought to issues of religious belief. The Pacific Northwest continues to become increasingly secular, a process that shows no signs of reversing. It seems likely that for the foreseeable future, the region will remain at the lead of secularizing currents that continue to grow across North America.

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Tunisia

YOSR BEN SLIMA

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor stated

> So what I want to do is to examine our society as secular in this third sense, which I could perhaps encapsulate in this way: the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.
>
> (Taylor 2007, 3)

When I first started thinking about atheism in Tunisia, I carried with me the certainty that atheism does not exist as a possibility in Tunisian society. With the passing years, the term *Mulhid* (atheist) has become common not merely in intellectual circles, but in rap songs, social media, and even classrooms. However, the existence of atheism as a possibility does not necessarily entail its acceptance. In fact, the identity of the Tunisian citizen, of the one who truly belongs to the nation, rests on a discursive process in which non-Muslims are defined as 'foreigners', 'alienated', and others. In this national imaginary of belonging, the non-Muslim Tunisian occupies a position that is thought to be improper and dangerous, even a threat to the sense of identity and the social order of the Tunisian nation. This form of abjection is one in which the non-Muslim existence is cast as the antithesis of the Arab-Muslim identity of Tunisia and its core values. Atheism stands as the antithesis of tradition, local culture, national stability, and even morality. With few exceptions (e.g. Schielke 2012; Nieuwkerk 2018), studies of non-religion have paid little attention to atheism in Muslim-majority countries. Islam is often approached either in relation to an ideological secular project or an Islamist project, but rarely in relation to those who left it. When atheism is examined, it is often at the ideological and historical levels. This chapter, however, opts for an ethnographic approach that highlights practices, lived experiences, and material manifestations of atheism. I will demonstrate how

atheist Tunisians engage in conscious self-fashioning. Based on my fieldwork in Tunisia between 2015 and 2018, I focus on embodied forms and practices of atheism, situating the analysis of atheism in the bodies of my interlocutors, the spaces they inhabit and the objects that they possess. Atheism is not always intellectual, hidden, or abstract. It could be embodied, emotional, and visible.

While this chapter moves beyond the theological understanding of atheism, I find it necessary to examine the theological discussions of outward manifestation of apostasy prior to discussing atheism as a material 'mode of embodiment' (Lee 2015). An anthropological comprehension of atheist embodiment cannot be complete without a comparative approach that explores the difference between manifestations of apostasy (*riddah*) as theorized in theological essays, the Tunisian media and material manifestations of atheism as I have encountered them during my fieldwork.

Theological Understanding of Expressions of Apostasy

The idea that apostasy is not only an intellectual stance or an internal belief has been thoroughly examined in both theological and anthropological works. In *Freedom of Speech and Religious Limitations*, Asad compares Islamic law with old Christian practices, arguing that Islam did not produce confessional and inquisitorial practices that aim at externalizing heresy. This distinction between Islamic and Christian treatments of disbelief is employed to mark the difference between heresy or apostasy as an internal belief that incurs no legal punishment in Islamic law, and exteriorization of such beliefs, which is punishable on the grounds of its social and political disturbance of order. Based on the analysis of the Islamist lawyer al-Awwan, Asad explains the conceptualization of freedom of belief in Islam: 'the right to think whatever one wishes does not, however, include the right to express one's religious or moral beliefs publicly with the intention of converting people to a false commitment' (Asad 2011, 289). In the same vein, Mohamed Ghaly explains that according to the vast majority of classical Muslim scholars, 'apostasy is not only a personal or private issue. Apostasy relates in the first place to society at large and thus it is an affair of the state' (Ghaly 2013, 85). Hence, the public nature of apostasy presupposes the existence of deeds that reveal it. Apostasy is materialized by 'expressions of unbelief', specified as words and deeds implying unbelief (Grami 2010, 26). In his discussion of *takfir* in the Ottoman Age, Evstatiev explains: 'the apostatical words can be either explicit, viz. solemnly abjuring Islam, or implicit, viz. utterances incompatible with the

theological consensus (*ijmā*) or with the axiomatic articles of faith (*mā 'ulima min al-dīn*)' (Evstatiev 2015). For instance, Abd al-Rahman Shaykhazdeh, a seventeenth-century Hanafi scholar, considers the act of uttering '*Bismillah*' while drinking wine, and the celebration of Nowruz (the Persian New Year) among the expressions of apostasy (Peters and De Vries 1976).

It is clear that apostasy is not just a matter of 'belief', for the outward manifestation of it seems to be the main concern of Muslim jurists who agree that apostasy is committed through belief, words, or deeds. However, signs of apostasy differ across countries, jurists, and sociopolitical contexts. One of the manifestations of 'female apostasy' is marriage to a non-Muslim. In Tunisian legal history, the ambiguity of the question 'what counts as a material proof of apostasy?' was thoroughly discussed during the Houria Affair (1966) in which marriage, inheritance, and apostasy seemed to intersect. In 1945, Houria, a Muslim Tunisian woman, married a non-Muslim Frenchman and moved with him to France. After the death of her mother, the rest of her family excluded her from the inheritance. When Houria asked for her share of the inheritance, her siblings sued her. The lawyer claimed that Houria was an apostate, using her marriage with a non-Muslim and her French citizenship as evidence of her apostasy. This tactic was used to disinherit Houria, for Islam prohibits the inheritance by a non-Muslim of a Muslim. In 1966, the Court of Cassation declared that 'it is indisputable that a Muslim woman who marries a non-Muslim man, has committed an unforgivable sin and that Islamic law considers such a marriage null and void' (Lamine 2010, 8). Hence, the court declared the marriage of Houria void and noted that since she did not convert to the religion of her husband, her marriage to a non-Muslim is not clear evidence of apostasy. However, the court regarded her naturalization as a sign of her apostasy. It is worth noting that the case took place shortly after Tunisia's independence from France in 1956. During the colonial period, the *takfir* of Tunisians who obtain French citizenship was part of a campaign against naturalization. As Saeed and Saeed explain, 'a number of Muslim intellectuals, particularly those who were active in the struggle for independence, argued that taking up citizenship of the colonial power was equivalent to apostasy' (Saeed and Saeed 2004). While the link between obtaining French citizenship and apostasy has been severed both legally and socially, the correlation between apostasy and marrying a non-Muslim persists in contemporary Tunisian society.[1] Clearly, evidence of apostasy varies greatly from one historical context to another. What was perceived as

1 This correlation persists even though the ban on marriages between Tunisian women and non-Muslim men was lifted in 2017.

evidence of apostasy during the colonial context would rather amuse and confuse many Franco-Tunisians today, who identify as both French and Muslim.

What interests me in this discussion is not whether Islam tolerates apostasy or not, but the recognition of the exteriority of apostasy (speech and behaviour). This theological analysis of 'apostasy' considers exteriority as the most dangerous aspect of leaving Islam, since its visibility renders it a source of social and political disturbance. This point is underscored when we examine theological essays on apostasy. According to Shawqi Abu Khalil, there are two types of apostates: 'the silent apostate' who does not reveal his sin, and the 'public apostate' who displays his apostasy. The latter must be killed, for he would disturb social order and lead young Muslims astray (Khalil 1971). Abu Khalil considers apostasy as a form of mockery of Islam, while Yusuf al-Qaradawi is primarily concerned with provocation through publicly displayed apostasy that can potentially entice others to follow suit. The public manifestation of apostasy amounts to a declaration of war against God and his Prophet. According to al-Qaradawi, 'Apostasy is never just an intellectual stance: it entails a change of allegiance, an exchange of identity, and a transformation of belonging. The apostate transfers his allegiance and sense of belonging from one community to another, and from one homeland to another' (Krämer 2006, 210). He then adds that 'hidden apostasy' that does not openly declare itself could be more dangerous than overt heresy and unbelief since it can better infiltrate the body politic.

Media Portrayal of Atheism

Beyond theological debates, atheism appears in different lights in Tunisian media. Recently, the case of a fifteen-year-old Tunisian girl who committed suicide turned into a debate on religiosity and its absence in Tunisian society. The young girl, who happened to be a metal music lover, was depicted as a Satan worshipper who killed herself as an act of Satanist self-sacrifice. What is interesting in this case is the use of a particular phrase that I have encountered many times while reading comments on social media, and even in electronic newspapers: 'Atheists who worship Satan'. In an article written by one of the young girl's friends, he describes how he was arrested and accused of 'Atheism and Satanism'. During the interrogation, he was asked to repent by pronouncing the *Shahadah*.[2]

2 The statement of faith; there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.

One of my atheist interlocutors was listed as a Satan worshipper by a Facebook page aimed at reviving Islamic values and eradicating Satanism and atheism in Tunisia. This extreme case of othering immediately places the 'different individual' outside the social order and strips her of her social credibility. In order to support their claim, the Facebook page admins posted a picture of her wearing a black Halloween costume.

This following text was posted, followed by her picture:

> Some might wonder why the Tunisian authorities did nothing against the presence of Satan worshippers in Tunisia while they do know them and know the specific cafés and clubs where they meet. Listen to the truth that I am going to reveal; The American Embassy employs a professional agent who lives in Sidi Bou Said. He oversees a large number of associations and secret networks in Tunisia, including the association of Satan worshippers. This US agent recruits young Tunisians, and then these young Tunisians would recruit their friends.

Confusing Satanism with atheism and westernization is common among Tunisians. In this narrative of origins and authenticity, 'the foreign' must be chastised and expelled. Hence, it comes as no surprise that my interlocutor's behaviour is perceived as a form of Satanism. This controversy is not a unique occurrence in the history of Tunisia. The disjunction between the reality of young atheist Tunisians and their representation is noticeable in Tunisian newspapers. In 2007, *El Watan* published an article on Satanist gatherings at *L'Étoile du Nord*, a theatre and a cultural café where many students and young artists meet. It is famous for hosting heavy metal concerts. The article states that heavy metal is used to promote Satanism and drug addiction, and can lead to suicide. In 2009, a Tunisian newspaper published an article entitled 'Did Atheism exceed its limits in Tunisia?' (Annaharnews 2015), which sought to examine atheism in Tunisia as one of the forms of Satanism. In another article in *Al Sabah*, they are portrayed as cat-eaters, blood-drinkers often dressed in black, and listeners of hard rock. This period of Tunisia's history was marked by Ben Ali's attempts to reclaim Islam with the help of his son-in-law Sakher El Materi, who founded the first Islamic radio station. During this period, many unresearched and prejudiced articles discussing atheism, Satanism, and heavy metal were published.

This stereotypical depiction of atheist Tunisians urged me to engage with the materiality of atheism in a serious manner. The purpose of this chapter is not to produce a list of objects that surround my interlocutors, but to remove the understanding of atheism from its intellectual form towards a more

comprehensive understanding that recognizes the role of material objects and their significance in constructing the atheist self. I examine how decorative objects, sartorial choices, and even drinking habits intersect with one's atheist views. The intention is to use material objects, which embody social, political, ideological, and cultural values, in the study of atheism in Tunisia. The underlying assumption is that material objects, like words, are a form of discourse that is employed by my interlocutors to project the atheist aspect of themselves and differentiate themselves from the religious others. In *Locating Non-religion*, Lois Lee elaborates on an understanding of non-religion that transcends the intellectual aspect:

> The assumption that nonreligion is primarily intellectual is, therefore, important to engage within this context as it has the potential to limit the scope of methodological approaches for the study of nonreligion, and to do so in a way that means that the very few highly-codified forms of nonreligion receive enormous preference in research over more mainstream cultural threads and fuzzier forms. (Lee 2012, 143)

When I was conducting fieldwork in Tunisia, I was urged to meet with Tunisians presented by my interlocutors as *'les vrais athées'*, *kufar bel-hak* (true *kufar*),[3] 'the interesting atheists', or those who have interesting things to say about the history of atheism in Tunisia. Certain names were repeatedly mentioned for they were considered 'intellectual', and hence they could help me with my 'serious' scholarly endeavour, which 'has no room for trivialities', as one of my interlocutors phrased it. Zied[4] lamented the scarcity of 'authentic' atheists. He told me: 'Don't expect to meet many intellectuals. Some discussions could be trivial, emotional and not serious.' Then, he added: 'Some are using the atheist Facebook group as a dating website, rather than a space for serious intellectual debates.' For Zied, a young engineer who is passionate about philosophy, psychology, and debating, documenting atheism is a study of a purely intellectual and discursive process which does not include mundane details or emotional reactions, and thus he was eager to introduce me to highly educated/cultured atheist Tunisians. Such a position is premised on the prevalent idea that atheism is mainly an intellectual phenomenon, involving the rejection of religious ideas on theoretical grounds. The idea of 'intellectual and moral superiority' to religious persons is common in the intellectual discourse on atheism. For instance, Mzoughi, a Tunisian philosopher, asserts this dualism when he states 'The atheist is the

3 The term *kufar* is used in a sarcastic manner.
4 Zied is not his real name. All the names of my interlocutors are pseudonyms.

friend of humanity, and the believer is humanity's enemy. The atheist serves humanity for he rids it of its hazardous illusions' (Mzoughi 2014, 12). Mzoughi argues that atheism is rooted in rationalism and intellectual ability, while religion tends to be associated with irrationality and emotions.

I ended up meeting 'the intellectuals' of the group, as well as those who did not participate in intellectual debate circles. The fact that Zied urged me to meet well-educated and intellectual Tunisians has to do with the problem of representation. Atheists are often depicted as ignorant people who fail to truly understand the real essence of Islam. Many atheist Tunisians feel the need to counter these accusations by presenting atheism as rational and intellectual. Focusing on the intellectual aspect would have limited the scope of my methodological approach and discarded other manifestations of atheism in a context in which the subtlety of material symbols replaces blunt statements. In a context in which manifestations of atheism are extremely rare in the public space – unlike Britain, for instance, where anti-religious and irreligious statements and slogans are visible in public (a London bus advertisement reads: 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life') (Tomlins 2016) – one should pay attention to other manifestations such as clothing, stickers, decorative objects, or even the absence of religious objects.

Anthropological Observations of Atheism

At Home

Decorative objects are embedded in a complex system of symbolism. The choices of certain objects express identity across space. The interior of the house is filled with objects that are selected by its inhabitants for their functional, decorative, or cultural significance. When Lina invited me to her flat in La Marsa, I could not help but notice the difference between her family home and her current flat. Lina, who left her family home in the south of Tunisia to study and then work in the capital, is now living away from her parents in a drastically different environment. While her family home is saturated with religiosity (framed Quranic verses adorn the walls and several Qurans are displayed in every room), her own flat does not contain a single religious element. Lina, like many of my interlocutors, made the conscious decision to avoid religious artefacts. Many of my interlocutors refuse to decorate their rooms with verses from the Quran or the Quran itself, which is a common practice in many Tunisian households. They have

removed the objects that used to surround them, such as a small Quran under the pillow or a photo of Mecca, not for aesthetic reasons but to mark their 'rite of passage' transition from being Muslims to being atheists. In *At Home*, Short argues that 'the home is an active moment in both time and space in the creation of individual identity, social relations, and collective meaning. The home is an important site of ideological meanings' (Short 1999, 10). For several of my interlocutors, the act of crossing the threshold is not a shift from the exterior to the interior, but from the living room, the communal space, to their private rooms. Locking one's room has a protective role since it physically and symbolically separates them from the hegemony of Islam. For my interlocutors who live with religious family members, the living room is not considered part of their domestic or intimate sphere, but a continuation of the public sphere. Having a locked door protects them from the intrusion of their family members.

The shift from being a Muslim to being an atheist produces a disturbance even in the domestic sphere. The efforts to articulate one's new identity can be reflected on the walls of one's room. In *Negotiating Space in the Family Home*, Munro and Madigan argue that 'The concept of "home" embraces both a physical and social space; the house itself is home, as are the social relations contained within it. The concept of "home" also carries a heavy ideological burden. It can be seen as part of an ideological trinity: "family," "home," and "community"' (Madigan and Munro 1999, 107). While Lina's 'true home' is her current rented flat away from her parent's home, Souad's home is reduced to her own room. She experiences the communal areas of the home as an exterior space. The monopoly of her religious parents over the living room renders it more of an exterior space over which she exercises little control. For both Lina and Souad, a real home is a space where a person expresses her 'true self', one which is often alienated inside their parents' homes. For instance, Souad explains that the act of sitting in the living room entails her participation in her parents' activities, such as watching religious TV channels or listening to the Quran. To avoid this feeling of unease, Souad spends long hours in her own room studying or participating in online debates with like-minded people.

Souad's home in one of Tunis' middle-class neighbourhoods abounds with religious objects. She is the only atheist in her family. She described her family as 'an ordinary Tunisian family; conservative but not too religious'. The walls of their living room were adorned with Quranic verses on a copper paper and adorned with glitter. There was also a framed photograph of Mecca. A copy of the Quran was resting on the corner table. The

arrangement of these objects in prominent positions in the living room reveals their importance for Souad's parents. Though this usage of religious objects would be considered as kitsch or 'bad taste' by upper-middle-class Tunisians or Tunisian artists, framed Quranic verses can be found in many Tunisian houses. However, unlike the rest of the house, Souad's room did not contain a single religious object. Instead, Souad had a collection of porcelain cats and framed photographs of her favourite feminist writers. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Halton, objects in domestic interiors 'serve to socialize a person to a certain habit or way of life and are representative signs of that way of life' (Csikszentmihalyi and Halton 1981, 21). The absence of religious decorations from Souad's room is deliberate and not for aesthetic reasons, with Souad explaining: '[They] don't reflect who I am.' In the intimacy of her room, Souad attempts to create a space where she does not feel estranged. She explained to me the reason behind the absence of the Quran in her room:

> I grew up surrounded by copies of the Quran, in every single room. As a child, I used to recite the *Fatiha* before going to bed . . . I would start with '*Bismillah*' before eating my meal. Religion was everywhere . . . so when I ceased being a Muslim, the first thing I decided to do was to remove the Quran from my room!

The urge to remove the old Islamic images around the house and put up new pictures and artefacts is noticeable among several of my interlocutors. Randa told me that her room used to contain framed verses of the Quran, as well as a small decorative Mecca and copies of the Quran. Most of these religious objects were offered to her by relatives and friends of her parents. She told me that, even before realizing that she was no longer a Muslim, and during her period of doubt, she developed a repulsion and disgust at the sight of these objects, and she ended up hiding them inside her closet. 'At first, I was scared of what could happen to me if I throw them away, but I couldn't stand them anymore.' By placing religious objects aside, Randa attempted to avoid any interaction with objects that tend to evoke complex emotions. Her repulsion from religious objects was intertwined with her fear of God's punishment.

When I visited Farah in her coastal hometown, she told me that she could spend weeks without stepping outside the house. During her leisure time, she paints and communicates with her friends online. It was at this point that Farah showed me some of her paintings. Farah's artistic expression is primarily shaped and motivated by her lack of faith and love for science. Her artistic production is a form of translating the importance of 'being true to herself'.

Art is neither set apart from the praxis of life nor from her intellectual values. It shapes her everyday life and is an expression of her intellectual views. She passionately debated the role of science in her life, which is one of the main reasons behind her rejection of the idea of an Abrahamic God. Farah is aware that she is too angry at the world that surrounds her. She clearly states it:

> I am angry. I realize it. I try to rationalize my anger but it's difficult because religion seems everywhere. It dominates my world and the virtual sphere is my only way out.
>
> I wish I could simply live without having to waste all this time thinking about religion, being self-conscious and careful when I talk with Tunisian Muslims. I waste a lot of energy on this. I just want to live.

Farah's art is part of her attempts to live according to her values. She participated in the *Choftouhonna* Tunisian Feminist Art Festival[5] with a painting of a feminist figure. Among the paintings that adorn her room was a portrait of John Lennon and a drawing of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.[6] The choice of celebrating feminism, John Lennon, or the Spaghetti Monster are directly tied to her atheist views. Within the hyper-politicized and polarized post-revolutionary context, Farah uses her artistic practices to position herself against what she deems 'suffocating religiosity'. The presence of the Spaghetti Monster drawing in her room is not surprising. Farah, who grew up watching English-speaking TV channels, has a perfect mastery of English that allows her access to New Atheist books, YouTube videos, and a network of atheist friends from all over the world. While she traces her agnosticism to her first encounter with science at high school, she finds New Atheist slogans and videos very entertaining in their irreverence. Her art not only reflects her scientific background, but also her exposure to international non-religious social movements.

Farah, who is a follower of many atheist, humanist, and irreligious sarcastic blogs and Facebook pages, became familiar with this parody and incorporated it in her artistic work. Farah's atheism is inscribed in her domestic space. During the time I spent with her, I noticed that she links her comfort and sense of belonging to her own domestic sphere, where she could paint, read, and share her art and ideas with like-minded people online. Her control over her domestic sphere is in sharp contrast with her sense of external

5 The festival is organized by the presidents of *Chouf* Minorities association, which is an intersectional feminist organization that approaches the struggle for LBTSW's rights (lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, sex workers).

6 The Spaghetti Monster is the symbol of Pastafarianism, a social movement that promotes a sarcastic view of religion and opposes the teaching of creationism in western public schools.

alienation. This alienation stems from the necessity of being hypocritical in order to be accepted. According to Keane, 'sincerity is not just a matter of imputed alignment between expression and interior state but also a product of one's desire to make one's expressions aligned in this way' (Keane 2007, 211). This desire to align one's interiority with exterior expressions is a central element in the lives of several of my interlocutors. Within this sincerity framework, atheist subjectivity is formulated in terms of being true to one's self. It becomes an ethical commitment that is often set against the rhetoric of hypocrisy. Hence, the desire to choose one's decorative objects becomes a manner of making one's interiority a source of meaning that manifests itself even in the reshaping of one's private space.

Farah's reinvention of her domestic environment through art, and her desire to stay within, is related to her desire to inhabit a space where she could be true to herself, and live following her 'own standards'. In *Leisurely Islam*, Deeb and Harb document leisure and morality from the vantage point of young Shi'ites in the southern suburbs of Beirut, known as Dahiya. Their interlocutors understand their 'staying inside' in Dahiya as the centre of their leisurely lives as comforting and reassuring in contrast with the '*bara*' (outside), which is associated with 'immorality and promiscuity' (Deeb and Harb 2013). The authors describe a community for whom leaving entails a risk of corruption and discomfort. While my interlocutor does not share the religiosity of the young Shi'i Muslims, she does establish a similar distinction between her inside world where she can express her 'genuine self', and the outside world where she has to conceal it.

Of Clothes and Pendants

One of the ways through which human beings use the body to enact social and cultural positions is through their sartorial choices. These choices are expressive of the groups we are or desire to belong to. Beyond the mere absence of religious dress, there are several ways in which atheism could be revealed in one's sartorial choices. One of my interlocutors had a customized T-shirt with the image of Homer Simpson wearing an 'I love Allah' T-shirt. The choice of Homer Simpson, who is constantly irreverent towards religion, is also a hidden message of mockery of what he considers as 'schizophrenic Muslims' (those who do not abide by Islamic rituals, yet vociferously defend Allah and Islam). These displays are tied up with processes of representation among my interlocutors. They are not overt statements of atheism, but rather subtle symbols that indicate one's irreligious views. These subtle

symbols remain unintelligible to many Tunisians, which explains why some Tunisians venture out with these T-shirts in public. These T-shirts seek to make an identity statement, but most of the time it goes unrecognized. The fact that the character of Homer Simpson is not a popular cultural reference might explain why ordinary Tunisians fail to grasp the irony behind such a T-shirt. It is also worth mentioning that my interlocutors are careful in their choice of the right places to display such T-shirts. Most of them only wear them when they attend private parties or small gatherings with like-minded friends. In *Recognizing the Non-religious*, Lois Lee argues that everyday forms of non-religion remain unnoticed like a 'dusty, unnoticed flag' for they are 'part of the ordinary cultural contexts within which we live and with which we are complicit' (Lee 2015, 72). Unlike the banal, ordinary forms of everyday non-religion in Britain, the unnoticeable forms of everyday atheism in Tunisia could remain unnoticed because they are not recognizable by the vast majority of Tunisians.

When walking in Tunisian streets, one might notice that many women adorn their necks with a *Rihana*, a silver necklace with a *Khomsa* pendant. While the custom of wearing the *Khomsa* (the hand of Fatma) is ingrained in Tunisia's Muslim culture and tradition, wearing a *Tanit* necklace or ring is very rare. The rarity of the practice makes it noticeable. *Tanit*, who was worshipped in the Phoenician–Punic colonies, especially in Carthage, is used by Mariem to connect with that pre-Islamic past. The *Tanit* ring that she wears is one of the manifestations of her atheist identity. In Tunisia, women usually wear *Khomsa* to ward off the evil eye. The term *Khomsa* derives from the number *Khamsa* (five). It is also known as '*La main de Fatma*' (Fatma's hand), a term coined by French ethnologists. Emna Ben Miled argues that this *Khomsa* is nothing but *Tanit* that had been mistakenly cut off from its Carthaginian origins by French ethnologists during French colonization (Miled 1998), while others claim that the *Khomsa* is nothing but the hand of the Carthaginian god *Ba'al*, which used to serve as an amulet to Carthaginians. Later, this pre-Islamic esoteric and numerological tradition was reintegrated by Tunisian Muslims. When I asked her about the ring, she told me that she picked it because of its uniqueness and that she doesn't want to wear the hand of Fatma, or other forms of protection often worn by Tunisian women. Later, when we were discussing my work on material atheism, I explained to her the role of the *Yaz* as a pre-Islamic symbol. She replied: 'It is similar to *Tanit*, she is a reminder that we had a past before Islam.' Then she added: 'I take pleasure in explaining to people that it is the Goddess of fertility.' Mariem seizes the opportunity to explore the pre-

Islamic history of the Tunisian gods and goddesses who preceded Allah in an affirmation of a period of Tunisian history that has been neglected by most Tunisians. What is both remarkable and ironic is that behind what appears as a Muslim symbol lies a history of pre-Islamic deities. Mariem's attempt to distance herself from Islamic symbolism while opting for pre-Islamic symbols (*Tanit*) is based on the assumption that the *Khomsa* is a purely Muslim symbol, which is an assumption shared by most Tunisians.

As discussed earlier, Randa's process of leaving Islam was accompanied by the complete clearing from her room of any religious elements. This process of discarding religious objects included her jewellery. She argued that the absence of religious elements facilitates the erasure of Islam from her private sphere. When I asked her to explain further, she stated: 'Islam exists thanks to its omnipresence. It manifests itself in our language, in the Quran that we put in our living rooms, in the rosary that we use to decorate our cars, in the *ayat al-kursi*[7] pendants that we wear. It is everywhere.' She added that she no longer wears her *ayat al-kursi* pendant, but she did not throw it away since it is a gift from her mother.

> I look at it from time to time, and it feels like I remember a different person. I find it too hard to believe that I used to wear this pendant and cherish it as a source of protection. I was very young at that time, but it is impressive how humans change!

The significance of the absence of the pendant, as a religious emblem, lies in the way it becomes associated with a different self. Wearing this small pendant, which might seem insignificant, represented another way of being in the world – in Randa's case, always attached to the sacred, and reminded of its presence even on her body. The absence of the pendant is for her a visible expression of her 'new self'. She understood her 'new self' as a grown-up self, connected to her mother but in a different and more detached way. She states:

> It is no longer a 'symbiotic relationship'. I do not love her less but differently, the sort of love that accommodates my individuality. It took me a while to understand that love is not about self-denial. I used to feel guilty about my ideas and sorry for my poor, pious mother who gave birth to an atheist. Then I started reading about the mother–child tie, and I learned that separating from this bond is part of growing up. I could have experienced the same

7 *Ayat al-kursi*, or the Throne Verse, is considered by many Tunisians and Muslims across the globe as a source of protection against any form of evil. Many Muslims recite it during times of distress, or wear it inscribed on a pendant as a preventive measure.

> thing, regardless of my atheism. Most children consider their parents as gods, but this idealization changes when we become gradually aware of their imperfections.

Randa's process of establishing a new self is tightly linked to the re-examination of her relationship with her mother. While Randa asserts that she remains very close to her mother, she admits that the process was fraught with feelings of guilt for distancing herself from Islam, which is an essential element in her mother's life. While her mother accepted her declaration of atheism, though not without sadness and hope that she might change her mind, Randa struggled with her feelings of guilt. From her perspective, Islam is not only a religion; it is tightly intertwined with moments she shared with her mother in Ramadan, objects that were offered to her, such as the pendant, and even her whole upbringing. For an extended period, she viewed her rejection of Islam as a moment of separation from her mother, and a form of betrayal. This guilt diminished when she re-examined her conceptualization of love and the connection between mother and daughter.

For several of my interlocutors, being atheist involves a particular way of understanding their bodies and marking it as such. The practice of choosing pre-Islamic accessories, the celebration of the unveiled body, especially amid the rising anxiety of losing one's bodily autonomy with the rise in public religiosity, is framed as an important part of being an atheist Tunisian. The fashioning of the atheist body operates on many levels, including the superficial, outward manifestation. However, the self-fashioning of the body is not the only terrain where my interlocutors cultivate their atheist selves.

The Quest for an Atheist Identity Through Alcohol Drinking

I can only think of rare atheist gatherings I attended where alcohol was not present in the room.[8] Whenever I let my interlocutors choose a meeting point, I found myself in bars, restaurants that serve alcohol, or attending weddings where alcohol is served. In 2016, while I was doing fieldwork in Tunisia, I met two of my interlocutors, Farah and Hala, at a café early in the evening. Later that night, we were joined by their atheist friends, Ahmed, Hedi, and Khalid, who decided that we should move to a new bar-restaurant. All of my evening companions were drinkers; some of them drank

8 While guilt-free drinking of alcohol is a way of constructing one's atheist difference, it is not in itself a cause of atheism.

occasionally while others were wine connoisseurs. During the evening, when we had to choose a bottle of Tunisian wine, I confessed that I knew little about Tunisian wine, to the shock and dismay of Khalid, who lamented the general lack of knowledge of such an important component of Tunisian identity – an ignorance he attributes to erasure of the pre-Islamic past. While explaining to me the difference in taste between Vieux Magon, Château Mornag, and Magnifique, Khalid emphasized the importance of celebrating our pre-Islamic heritage through an understanding of winemaking. He mentioned the importance of Mago, the Carthaginian agriculturist, in the history of vinification, but also as a national figure that has been erased from the Tunisian imaginary. According to Khalid, the stigmatization of drinking is tightly linked to its perception as a foreign element that is alien to Tunisia, and a result of colonization. He thought that the normalization of alcohol drinking cannot be achieved without a rewriting of Tunisian history that does not exclude the pre-Islamic past.

Historically, the cultivation of wine in Tunisia is associated with Carthage. The Carthaginian Mago, who lived in Carthage, wrote a treaty about agronomy and viticulture. With the arrival of Islam production declined, and it was only reintroduced during French colonization (1881–1956). In the contemporary Tunisian context, drinking wine is both popular and taboo. Alcohol is sold in supermarkets, small taverns, posh bars, restaurants in tourist areas, and hotels. Drinking alcohol is neither a 'normal act' as it is in western countries nor comprehensively prohibited as it is in several Muslim-majority countries. This in-between position acts as a highly symbolic marker.

Khalid was not only sharing his wine expertise. He was connecting with a pre-Islamic past that he views as an important component of his Tunisianness, while critiquing a national education that reinforces the Arab-Islamic past at the expense of the Carthaginian heritage. This conversation about wine revealed Khalid's frustration with the absence of a concrete articulation of the 3000-year-long civilization in national textbooks and popular culture. According to him, in contrast with the vocal political narrative of a 3000-year-civilization that is often used by 'progressive' or not-so-progressive opponents of political Islam, the tangible translation of this conceptualization of Tunisia's past remains absent. He lamented the failure of the educational experience to give young Tunisians a sense of identity that transcends 'the obsession with Arab and Muslim identity'.

This conversation reflects the deeply complex nature of Tunisian identity as viewed by many of my interlocutors. Debates on the erasure of the pre-Islamic past have been going on ever since the 2011 revolution in relation to a variety of

aspects of Tunisianness that have been erased or neglected in the official narrative of Tunisianness. Khalid mentioned one aspect – alcohol drinking – but many of my interlocutors extended the debate to include a discussion of the Amazigh past and Jewish heritage. In *Passage to Play*, Gusfield constructs drinking in American society as a marker of passage from work to leisure. He argues that the difference of contexts between work and leisure require different actions and behaviours. He states: 'Leisure is not-work: work is not-leisure. The terms separate areas of self-control required at work from those expressed at play: supervision; standardization and utilitarian forms of thought and criteria of action from areas of release, of spontaneity, of acting for its own satisfactions' (Gusfield 2003, 74). The shift from work to play operates in a ritualized manner that involves alcohol 'in establishing time frames of play'. This shift from work to play takes a different form in Tunisia, where the transition from work to play involves drinking coffee or tea in a *qahwa* or *salon de thé*. While it has become increasingly trendy among young people in urban settings to go for an after-work (alcoholic) drink, drinking coffee or tea remains the norm in Tunisia. Mainly a masculine institution, *el qahwa* is the most popular form of socialization after a day at the workplace.

For atheist Tunisians, drinking alcohol does not mark a shift from work to leisure, but rather a state of un-Muslimness. It signals their erasure of Muslimness not merely on an intellectual level but a total rejection that extends to their way of life. It demonstrates that they have freed themselves both intellectually and practically. This act of erasing Islam manifests itself in a celebratory posting of photos of alcoholic beverages – a glass of wine, a bottle of whisky, or even a bottle of wine accompanied by a plate of charcuterie, hence breaking two dietary prohibitions. Although drinking alcohol is prohibited from a religious perspective by most jurisprudence, there is a long tradition of drinking in Tunisia. Many Tunisian Muslims drink alcohol as the ever-rising rate indicates (Ghorbal 2017).

It is important to note that some Muslim Tunisians do not consider drinking alcohol as a sin, but rather as a mystic experience, while others view it as a sign of upper-middle-class refinement; however, these two views remain marginal. The assumption that it is tolerated because it is a common practice is not accurate. In fact, alcohol drinking is often constructed as an act of *ma'siya* (disobedience). Many Tunisian Muslim drinkers view drinking as a form of weakness and foolishness of young age that goes away with maturity. This ambivalence towards alcohol drinking serves as a norm to distinguish atheist drinkers who feel proud and shameless, and Muslims who view it as a sinful deed and hope for repentance.

Despite the existence of diverse views on alcohol consumption, and a *fatwa* by Tunisian Islamic scholar and historian Mohammed Talbi, who argued that drinking alcohol is not *haram*, in the Tunisian social imaginary alcohol is viewed as a significant infraction. Among pious Tunisian families, alcohol consumption is a red line that must not be crossed, while less pious non-practising Tunisian families would turn a blind eye to their male drinkers. Since alcohol drinking is perceived by the vast majority as a significant infraction, drinking it is rarely constructed by my interlocutors as an ordinary act. Apart from those who grew up with parents who drank alcohol at home when they hosted parties, dinners, or celebrated a marriage, the majority consider it as a subversive act.

In discussing Islamists' resistance to fun, Asef Bayat states that 'the adversaries' fear of fun revolves ultimately around the fear of exit from the paradigm that frames their mastery; it is about anxiety over loss of their "paradigm of power"' (Bayat 2013, 131). Indeed, it is against this fear, and in an attempt to establish a paradigm shift, that many atheist Tunisians celebrate drinking as a moment when they escape what they perceive as the looming threat of Islamists, and express their sense of selfhood. It is important to note that the discursive construction of having fun, partying, and drinking as modes of resistance to the Islamization of society became more recurrent among my interlocutors after the electoral success of the Islamist party Ennahda in 2011. For Gennep, the concept of *rites de passage* has been used to describe the characteristic rituals that mark movement from one status to another, from one stage in life to another (Gennep 1960). For some of my interlocutors, it is the first sip of alcohol that marks that shift from being Muslim or being in a liminal position to an affirmation of atheism.

The importance of drinking as part of atheist socialization has been emphasized by several of my interlocutors. In the context of atheist socialization, drinking must be understood beyond the act of consuming alcohol; for atheist Tunisians, it is a conscious embodiment of their commitment to concepts such as freedom and guilt-free pleasure. Sharing a bottle of wine thus becomes an act of atheist sociability that combines several elements deemed important to many atheist Tunisians; it is a moment of irreverence, fun, freedom, and spontaneity that stands against Islam as a disciplined way of life.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to examine the way the atheist body is embedded in a narrative of emancipation and autonomy. This implies that religious restrictions are viewed as a source of pain, misery, and enslavement. Irreligious Tunisians make a conscious effort to live a life demarcated from the hegemony of Islam. This cultivation of the irreligious self is sometimes formulated as a response to the perceived threat of Islamic hegemony as it manifests itself in the public sphere: mosque loudspeakers, the occupation of public space, stickers with messages that remind women of the necessity of veiling, self-proclaimed Muslims who engage in *enjoining what is right, and prohibiting what is wrong*, and terrorism.

If we want to reach a thorough understanding of atheism, it is important to understand how it is experienced in its materiality in everyday life. While studying the materiality of atheism is without doubt a crucial component for understanding atheism, its utility remains just one facet of my interlocutors' complex and rich experience. Their atheism manifests itself in their choice of artefacts, their sartorial choices, and the ways they experience space, but also in their commitment to defending freedom of speech, their mobilization for LGBT and women's rights, the intellectual content of social media pages, and even in their professional work.

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52

Southern Africa

LEO IGWE

Introduction

The cultural and intellectual history of Africa rarely mentions atheism as being and living in Africa. Frequently, what is emphasized is the notoriety and inevitability of belief and its diverse performances in the form of rituals and deities and practices related to human attempts at appeasing and manipulating their assumed powers (Parrinder 1954; Mbiti 2015). However, atheism and its culturally informed performances are diffused in (southern) Africa. This is a core claim of Okot p'Bitek in his disagreement with Mbiti's thesis on the notoriety of African religiosity: Africans make fun or jokes about the gods; sometimes what may seem a religious performance is in reality a religious ridicule of the deities. In fact, some performances – such as oracle consultation and divination, the choice of a new king, or the cause of death or disease in a community – that are considered acts of God are human acts disguised as God's.

Atheism is a subcultural trend that is heavily diffused in southern Africa, and in other parts of the region. This diffused situation is often mistaken to be absence, to mean that African atheists do not exist or that atheism has no place in the African discourse. Until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, there were no known atheist societies in the region. Intellectually and socially, the atheistic outlook is embedded in strands of religious criticism in indigenous religious/cultural formations, in anti-colonial, anti-apartheid struggles, in socialist/communist movements, in postcolonial and post-apartheid religions, in critical discourses and humanistic philosophies such as the Ubuntu and Zambian humanism. Atheistic ideas have resonated in the responses to fundamentalist Christianity and Islam, witch-hunting, and bizarre religious practices and the commercialization of religion in southern Africa. In the twenty-first century, atheism in southern Africa has been linked to social media, virtual activism, and expressed dissatisfaction with dominant religions.

Atheism, the lack of belief in the existence of God(s), is found in all cultures including within African societies. Although terms and terminologies that exactly translate to the English word 'atheism' may be lacking in some African societies – just as the word for 'religion' is lacking too – sentiments of disbelief abound; expressions of lack of faith in a deity have been parts of traditions and cultures since precolonial times. Incidentally, little or no attention has been paid to the evolution of atheistic thought in Africa. Usually associated with the west, the atheistic outlook is linked to a materialist worldview, mechanistic philosophies, and the secularization of society (Borkenau 1987; Borer 2010). African cultures have often been regarded as opposed to secular and atheistic tendencies; modern Africa has been conceptualized in relation to magic, witchcraft, theism, and the occult (Evans-Pritchard 1976; Geschiere 1997).

Religion in Africa has been a dynamic phenomenon, and has changed and continued to take new forms and dimensions over the years (see Phiri et al. 2016, xv). Contacts with other cultures have led to new forms of religious belief and expressions. These beliefs have been added to existing belief structures or sometimes replaced or modified old ones. Central to these religions is the notion of a god or gods. Every new religion has tried to institute a new form of deity; religious encounters have yielded a panoply of gods – living, dead, and dormant. Multiple deities characterize the African religious and cultural landscape.

Surveys have overwhelmingly revealed a sway of religious and theistic beliefs in African societies. According to the Pew Research Center (2018), 89 per cent of Africans say that they believe in God with absolute certainty. African countries including Nigeria, Ghana, and Ethiopia have been polled on different occasions as the most religious nations in the world. These polls highlight intense theistic conceptions as well as shifting patterns of belief and disbelief in divinities. More importantly, these polls also indicate the overwhelming amount of human resources devoted to the performance of religion and beliefs. Africans spend more time praying than working. They build more infrastructure dedicated to religion than to education or science and technology. There are more religious and sacred sites than clinics, schools, hospitals, maternities, and dispensaries combined. This overwhelming social presence of religion is literally taken to mean that unbelief, disbelief, atheism, and their corollaries are non-existent. Scholars[1] have argued that Africa is incurably religious (see Platvoet and van Rissum 2003; Olabimtan 2003).

1 I am grateful to Professor Asonzeh Ukah of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town for drawing my attention to some relevant literature on irreligion in Africa.

These manifestations of religion have given credence and force to the notion that Africans are deeply, notoriously, and overwhelmingly religious and theistic (Mbiti 2015). However, atheistic viewpoints have always been part and parcel of African thought and lived experiences. Although quite individualistic, strands of religious doubts are found in indigenous religions, and disbelief is suffused throughout cultural traditions that pre-date the Christian and Islamic religious influence in the region. Indeed, cultural antecedents of atheism in southern African societies are rooted in religious criticism that goes back to precolonial times, to the anti-colonial, socialist, and communist movements in the region.

Indigenous Tradition and Incipient Atheism

Atheism is embedded in the indigenous sceptical tradition that flourished in precolonial southern Africa, in vague as well as overt doubts, in religious disinterestedness, indifference, and rejection of deities or their earthly mouthpieces.[2] Incipient atheism is contained in varieties of indigenous religious and cultural experiences of the peoples of southern Africa. God-critical sentiments have manifested significantly in disputes and negotiations over the verdicts of oracles, spirit mediums, and other mouthpieces of gods (Fry 1976; Spierenburg 2004). It has been noted that before the colonialists introduced formal courts and tribunals, deities provided guidance and adjudicated cases through special human agents – spirit mediums – and other divine emissaries such as the Sangoma and the Nganga, who issued pronouncements and declarations that were used to settle disputes and resolve conflicts (Scoones et al. 2012).

Indigenous religions domesticated various gods, and these deities, attached to the communities or to the clans, served as emblems of guidance and protection. However, cultural outsiders were sceptical of these indigenized deities; they challenged and questioned the essence, existence, assumed influence, and protection of particular gods. In fact, those at the opposing end of unfavourable divinations viewed these gods with doubt, disbelief, and extreme scepticism. Critical viewpoints manifested in situations in which disputing parties took their cases and complaints to various divinatory facilities believed to convey the true and just verdicts of the gods or to upend contentious verdicts (Igwe 2017). People commissioned spirit mediums to disclose divine decrees, and these divine pronouncements were sometimes met with objections or outright rejection,

2 These critical elements still manifest in the practice of indigenous religions and cultures in contemporary African societies (Igwe 2017).

especially from those unfavoured by these indigenous processes. For instance, Shona religionists rely on mediums for the pronouncements of new chiefs or heads of communities, or deciding who represents the local communities in government (Garbett 1966; Ranger 1982). Mediums are consulted to resolve land disputes or to find cures for diseases and ailments. In situations where these pronouncements are deemed illegitimate or not in accordance with public opinion, they are challenged or appealed. While these mediums symbolize a culture of belief and fidelity, they also embody elements of doubt, objection, rebellion, resistance, and rejection.

Ubuntu and Person-To-Person Cosmology

Beyond the critical elements in indigenous religious and cultural traditions, currents of disbelief in gods and their assumed powers and influence are sequestered in cultural philosophies such as Ubuntu. Ubuntu is an ethnophilosophical outlook with atheistic proclivities. With an emphasis on person-to-person connection, Ubuntu is fundamentally unconcerned with the divine as a central and pivotal preoccupation. Even though Ubuntu is not expressly atheistic, this cultural philosophy has the community, the group, or communal existence at the centre of its perception and orientation (Mangena et al. 2016). The isiXosa expression 'Umntu ngumtu ngabantu' roughly translates as 'a person is a person through others'. Ubuntu embodies a humanistic philosophy that emphasizes human sharing and caring (Tutu 2011). Thus, reverence and worship of deities are not necessary conditions for human happiness and existential fulfilment. While drawing on the interdependence of persons, Ubuntu encapsulates African humaneness and humanism (Ramose 1999; 2014). African here-and-nowness, this-worldliness, and goodness without god are the philosophical pillars. Ubuntu valorizes human community, power, and agency as opposed to subsuming the human to a transcendental, meta-social overarching entity. Ubuntu societal values and ideals are non-theistic because they preclude the idea of an active god intervening and driving individual and social relations, and consummating human redemption and salvation.

Ubuntu is based on the notion that persons are made by other persons (Battle 2009), interpersonal relations, and understanding (Eze 2008, 107); relationships with divinities do not define a person's humanity. Put simply, within the framework of Ubuntu, human development and fulfilment of potential does not require divine fiat or enablement; human beings are gods to other humans.

It is pertinent to note that while Ubuntu notedly embodies spiritual attributes (Tutu 2011), its philosophical mainstay is society (Mbigi 1997, 2), worldly affairs, and engagements. Thus, Ubuntu is people-, community-, and person-centric. Ubuntu plays out in the struggles for social equality and justice, economic liberation, and emancipation realizable in person-to-person, not person-to-god or god-to-person, relationships. Recognizing the power of humans, Ubuntu rallies human social and community relations in shaping and altering the life course, and in discerning and directing destinies unaided by the divine.

Anti-Colonial/Anti-Apartheid Movement and Infidelity in Foreign Gods

Apart from the Ubuntu cultural philosophy, elements of religious disbelief are evident in anti-colonial struggles that swept across southern Africa in the twentieth century. The Dutch brought colonialism along with slavery and Christianity to South Africa in 1652 (Chidester 1996, 11; 2000, 412f.; Leatt 2017, 27f.). The imperial religion of (European) Christianity and its theology of domination and entitlement inspired, mediated, maintained, and sustained the apartheid system. In fact, the Dutch Reformed Church was the official church of the regime and espoused theological doctrines in support of apartheid. Dutch Reformed theology was the ideological foundation and incubator of the apartheid system. Apartheid was a 'Christian' theological idea and teaching before it became a political and enforceable practice or law.

God-critical elements are embedded in the reactions to Christian and Islamic missionary activities, and in the responses to other theistic, quasi-religious traditions and ideologies that have been introduced to southern Africa. Colonialization of southern Africa – and in fact the entire continent, with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia – was not only a political exercise, but also a religious process. Colonialists forced their own government and their own gods on the people, compelling Africans to abandon their 'uncivilized' and 'heathen' deities. Thus, the struggle against colonialism entailed questioning and challenging colonial, migrant, foreign gods, the gods of apartheid, and the white gods. A popular saying is often invoked to highlight how missionaries deceived and dispossessed Africans in the name of the Christian god: 'When the white man came to our country, he had the Bible and we (blacks) had the land. The white man said to us, "Let us pray." After the prayer, the white man had the land, and we had the Bible' (see Mofokeng 1988, 34).

Socialist/Communist Influence

In some cases, atheistic strands found their ideological embodiments in the religion-critical views of socialism and communism. Atheism in southern Africa was anchored in the socialist and communist movements that swept across the region in the colonial and postcolonial eras. The rationalist atheism of Marxism lurked in the thoughts and attitudes of especially African intellectuals and politicians. The socialist or Marxist movements underscored the instrumentality of religion and god belief in capitalist exploitation. In places such as South Africa and Angola, the socialist/communist movements led to the formation of parties including communism-leaning organizations that sought to rule and govern countries based on anti-theistic political ideologies. These organizations popularized the Marxist idea that religion was a hindering factor in the realization of a classless society – and, as a form of opium, religion was an instrument for the exploitation of the African masses. Belief in God was not in tandem with the proletarian struggle against bourgeois oppression and exploitation.

Pronounced in colonial and postcolonial dispensations, socialist and communist ideas underscored the central role of society and social relations, of lack of need for God and some extra-societal force as an arbiter or to explain problems, progress, happiness, and well-being (see Mboya 1963, 17).

Wealth and poverty were factored into comprehensible and alterable social dynamics, social struggles, and mobilization, rather than some inscrutable fiat of an overbearing deity that was beyond human control, except through prayer and intercessions that lacked any guarantee of a positive response.

As some scholars have argued, although the ideas of European intellectuals – Marx and Engels – shaped the theories of socialism and communism, these ideas had African forms and elements that stressed dignity, egalitarianism, and regard for human beings as the focus (see Mboya 1963; Mohan 1966). The European socialist components have been noted to have found their way to Africa through African students who went to study in the west and later returned to champion the anti-colonialist campaign (Drew 2014). Critical of African, western and eastern gods, and viewing religion with suspicion and mistrust, socialist and communist ideas rallied against colonial domination and exploitation – white supremacy and economic expropriation in South Africa, and other forces antithetical to the realization of the working class revolution in the region. In the postcolonial dispensation, these non-theistic ideologies had several African forms and adaptions, such as the Zambian humanism of Kenneth Kaunda.

Zambian Humanism and Postcolonial Infidelity

Zambian humanism, an adapted state philosophy that Zambia's first president, Kenneth Kaunda, proposed, embodies implicit criticism of religion and the gods. Introduced in 1967 to guide the crafting of a postcolonial Zambian state, Zambian humanism was based on state control of the economy and a form of African socialism. Zambian humanism is a non-theistic ideology with the objective of enabling Zambia to break free from its colonial past and forge a sense of identity and meaning for Zambians (and in fact Africans more broadly) in the postcolonial era.

It encapsulates a combination of socialist ideas and African values such as loyalty to family and community. Predicated on the centrality of people, not deities, Zambian humanism is based on principles such as 'the dignity of man', 'hard work and self-reliance', 'equal opportunities for all', and 'non-exploitation of man by man' (Anon., n.d.). With an emphasis on freedom and the capacity of humans to control and shape their destinies with and within the family and community, Zambian humanism was a philosophical template for the realization of a free and prosperous Zambian nation.

However, Zambian humanism proved ineffective as a national ideology following the collapse of the Soviet Union, economic crisis in Zambia and other postcolonial African states, and global trends such as the emergence of the 'Christian' America and the west more broadly, which resulted in a political and ideological detour.

In the post-Kaunda era, politicians in Zambia have steered the nation towards the Christian religion and god. In fact, a former president, Chiluba, declared Zambia a Christian state, and Christianity the state religion (Gifford 1998, 362). Beneath the veneer of Christian piety and religious fervour are currents of infidelity and disbelief sweeping across Zambia and other southern African countries.

Contemporary Atheism

In contemporary southern Africa, the religious landscape has been undergoing rapid changes as various strands of religious criticism coalesce in trends and currents that address postcolonial and post-apartheid religious dominance. There has been growing visibility of atheism and freethought tendencies in the face of threats of religious extremism and bigotry. These trends call into question religious claims and hold accountable religious leaders. Atheistic undercurrents are evident in reactions to the excesses of clerics, of god

men, and god women in the region. Disbelief in divinities is embedded in the widespread criticism of the religious establishment and the bizarre claims of pastors and other religious leaders, and in the condemnation of religious exploitation and manipulation of the people. In contemporary southern Africa, religious criticism, anti-establishment, and anticlerical proclivities have converged. Atheistic impulses resonate in state responses to the commercialization of religion and the abuse of people's beliefs; in the institution of South Africa's Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities; and in the expulsion by the government of Botswana of a homophobic pastor. Botswana also legalized homosexuality in 2019, shifting away from the rhetoric that same-sex relationships are against African spirituality and religiosity – one of the narratives that have been used to justify anti-gay laws and propaganda in the region.

Furthermore, southern African countries have also witnessed an increase in their atheistic demographics as the size of the atheistic population has continued to grow. The WIN-Gallup International's Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism 2012 noted that South Africa was among the countries in the world that experienced a notable decline in religiosity since 2005. Religiosity dropped from 83 percent in 2005 to 64 percent in 2012. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Foundation on Religion and Public Life, South Africa was one of the countries with the most religion-unaffiliated population (7 percent), along with Botswana (9 percent) and Mozambique (13 percent) (Pillay 2017, 13). Although these segments of the population did not explicitly identify as disbelievers, they indicate a shift in religious belief patterns with enormous implications for atheism in the region.

Freethought Activism in an Internet Age

Countries across southern Africa have witnessed a wave of freethought activism, of assertion of non-religious and irreligious views. Freethinkers have taken advantage of social media to question religious dogmas and challenge religious dominance and privilege. More particularly, social media has been a potent enabler of free expression of ideas because it has made it possible for freethinking individuals to overcome entrenched religious censorship and restrictions that have prevented their registration of doubts and disbelief.

Social media has amplified the voices and perspectives of atheists and infidels in the region; it has provided spaces for atheists to come out of the closet, and for critics and rejecters of religion, non-believers in God, to

express their views and opinions with less fear of being attacked, persecuted, or killed. Some atheists have recounted their journeys from belief to unbelief, especially the risks and challenges they faced living in communities that do not countenance disbelief in God. Facebook, Twitter, and other websites have served as platforms for expression and publication, for sharing and circulating blasphemous and heretical views. Social media has further enabled the organization of infidelity and the evolution of freethinking communities. Atheists and freethinkers in southern Africa have taken advantage of social media to organize and mobilize online, to connect and interact with like-minded persons, and to enjoy a sense of community, family, and fellowship that the religious establishment has systemically denied them. There is an online presence of freethought activists and organizations in Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Botswana, and more. Beyond their Internet presence, some of these organizations have met physically in Cape Town, Lilongwe, and Lusaka, and have engaged in campaigns against witch-hunting, as well as taken part in other humanitarian projects in their communities.

Conclusion

Atheism is emerging as a force to be reckoned with in postcolonial Africa, as various strands of religious criticism are transforming into mechanisms to battle the various gods. From subdued or incipient atheism that lurks in indigenous religio-cultural practices to the deity-critical elements in Ubuntu, in socialist and communist movements, and in the postcolonial religion-critical discourses, atheism is changing the religious landscape in the region. Atheism is providing Africans who are dissatisfied with the dominant religions – including ex-Christians, ex-Muslims, and ex-traditionalists – with alternative meanings, cosmology, morality, and fellowship systems. If in western history what applies is the saying by the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (2006, xxii, 8, 69), 'God is dead', in southern Africa it is far from the death of God as an entity. The death goes beyond a deity, or a god. It is rather a case of 'the Gods are dead'. Ancient, colonial, and postcolonial disbelieving Africans have to contend with gods linked to centuries of encounters with the east and the west. Atheistic currents are sandwiched in waves of theism – indigenous, Hindu, Christian, Islamic, Bahai, etc. – that wash over the continental landscape from the Pacific to the Atlantic coast. The old gods are either dead or dying,

and new ones are reluctant to be born in the crucible of the anguish of the black body.[3]

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3 This is a paraphrase of Emile Durkheim's (1995, 429) statement that 'the former gods are growing old or dying, and others have not been born'.

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53

Traditional Societies

BENJAMIN GRANT PURZYCKI AND RICHARD SOSIS

Introduction

Anthropologist Jack Goody (1996, 679) noted that 'Both gods and doubts are widespread, transversal (if not universal) aspects of culture, the result not of inbuilt processes but of the interaction between language-using human beings and their social and natural environment.' There are two important points Goody conveys here. First, doubt – that is, reluctance or resistance to adopt received wisdom (see Box 53.1) – exists in all societies. Second, doubt does not exclusively spring from some internal faculty, but rather is the output of a complex set of inputs to an organism that produces, manipulates, and transmits ideas. In other words, doubt emerges as the product of a systemic process. One implication of this view is that doubt can express itself differently across contexts; if humans' social and natural environments vary, it follows that doubt – as rising from their interaction – should exhibit itself in a corresponding fashion. Here, we point to ways in which people variously express religious doubt across traditions.

While doubt may be universal, how ubiquitous atheism and scepticism are within and across small-scale societies remains unclear. This stems partly from a lack of data from appropriate samples; most research on secularization focuses on state-level societies (Solt et al. 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2012) and most research on religion (or its absence) in small-scale societies is anecdotal and thus lacks precise, comparable measures of commitment. Nevertheless, the ethnographic record makes clear that around the world, people express doubt in various ways. If we wish to come to terms with the presence and ubiquity of doubt in any precise fashion, we need a thorough sense of how people express it, how this expression varies, and ways of measuring that variation.

BOX 53.1 Doubt, Atheism, Non-belief, and Non-Commitment

We refer to *doubt* as a motivational force that leads one to reluctance or resistance to received wisdom and practices. If we take Russell's (1961) colloquial distinctions as a starting point, *atheists* accept two propositions. The first is that we can know if gods exist. The second is that what we do know points to their lack of existence. *Agnostics* reject the first proposition and the second by implication, positing that there is neither enough reason nor evidence to answer the question. In this view, then, agnostics doubt while atheists confidently reject. What brings people to these positions, of course, is complicated, particularly if we take Goody's views seriously; just as the processes that lead to a rejection of theism are manifold (Norenzayan and Gervais 2013), the kinds of rejection or resistance to religion are multitudinous (Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2017). There are different shades of *non-belief* (e.g. atheism, agnosticism, and apatheism), and the ethnography of doubt or apathy, then, would examine how people variously express such states. As we have no a priori reason to suggest that a 'true' atheist is one who neither believes nor practices throughout some arbitrarily assigned span of time in his or her life, and there are no data on small-scale societies that reliably sample and measure such a position, we focus here on 'traditional' (i.e. pertaining to religions in small-scale societies) ways of expressing doubt and resistance to religious traditions in a variety of ways. *Non-commitment*, then, can vary between and include both *non-belief* (i.e. the mental processes involved in assigning truth value to something) and *non-participation*.

Here, we restrict our discussion to religious commitment – namely, individuals' beliefs about spiritual agents and the behaviours they associate with them (Wallace 1966; Spiro et al. 1987, 187–222; Purzycki and Sosis 2013) – and religious non-commitment. The foci have the benefit of avoiding issues of classifying social belief systems such as communism as a religion by virtue of its repressive ideological dogma. Similarly, we do not equate religious faith with 'ultimate concern' (Tillich 1957), thereby considering any target of maximal passion an object of religious devotion. Our focus is on popular beliefs and practices rather than targeting doctrine (see below). In what follows, then, 'religious doubt' refers to a lack of conviction or sense of uncertainty about spiritual beings and their associated practices.

While not crucial to our presentation, we do assume that belief and behaviour are dynamic. Behaviours can further stabilize ideological commitment and can contribute to forging beliefs as well, just as much as beliefs can harness the motivations to propel an individual to act (Sosis 2003). Acknowledging this dynamism highlights the weaknesses in some perspectives about what it means to be non-religious; one can be ideologically an

atheist, for example, but nevertheless a serious, devoted practitioner of the myriad behaviours associated with gods (see Box 53.1). Likewise, one can be a firm believer in the existence of gods and spirits, but without participating in any ritual activity or behaviours devoted to them. Indeed, anthropologists (e.g. Fernandez 1965) and social psychologists (e.g. Cohen, Siegel, and Rozin 2003) have recognized that different social groups value belief of religious ideas differently than they value participating in religious practices (Purzycki and Sosis 2011). Some emphasize ideological consensus (i.e. believing the same things) while others emphasize behavioural consensus, with beliefs relatively free to vary.

This chapter unfolds as follows. We begin by considering the universality of religion. Various scholars have argued that some traditional[1] societies are devoid of religious commitments or even a system of religion; we contest these claims and look closely at several commonly referenced examples of societies that allegedly lack religion, specifically the Hadza and Pirahã. We then consider popular and scholarly claims that Buddhism is atheistic. Next, we examine ethnographic data on societies that foster religious traditions that challenge, subvert, and even resist the religious social order. These religions provide a very different model of religion than is generally familiar among western societies. We conclude with a discussion of directions for future research on non-belief and doubt in traditional populations.

How 'Non-religious' Are Traditional Societies?

Rappaport (1999, 1) noted that 'No society known to anthropology or history is devoid of what reasonable observers would agree is religion.' Nonetheless, not all scholars agree, and there has been a recent influx and repetition of claims about the absence of religion, or some facet of religion, in certain traditional societies. These claims address the conceptual and/or factual aspects of the matter.

In terms of the conceptual, some scholars simply claim 'religion' is particular to only a few societies. Sperber (2018, 48), for example, doubts 'that all or even most human societies have had a religion in any useful sense of the term'. Boyer (2018, 121) elaborates: 'Religions appeared with large-scale kingdoms, literacy and state institutions. Before them, people had pragmatic cults and ceremonies, the point of which was to address specific

1 We use 'traditional' to broadly refer to relatively smaller societies that are less integrated with and/or rely less on markets and large, specialized bureaucracies than those in highly urbanized state systems (see Mattison and Sear 2016).

contingencies, misfortune in particular.'[2] For Boyer and Sperber, religion appears to be synonymous with spiritual traditions in large-scale social organizations and literacy. Despite the very high probability that all societies consist of individuals who hold beliefs about spirits and gods, perform behaviours thought to please them, and avoid and/or discourage behaviours thought to displease them, according to these authors, these do not qualify as 'religious'.

Political and religious leaders, as well as scholars, have also challenged observations asserting that traditional societies are religious or have religions. Small-scale societies, allegedly, are somehow less religious than large-scale societies. Christopher Columbus, for example, posited that the Canary Islanders 'would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to [him] that they had no religion' (Dunn and Kelley, Jr. 1989, 69). A century later, missionaries made similar statements about indigenous Caribbean traditions. One (Breton 1929 [*c.* 1635–47], 5) notes that 'After having lived without any knowledge of God, they die without hope of salvation. *It would be better for us to say that they have no religion at all*, instead of describing as a cult of divinity all their trifling nonsense, superstitions, or more exactly sacrileges with which they honor all of the demons who seduce them' (our emphasis). Another missionary (Bouton 1635, 1) suggests that 'they do not trouble themselves with knowing what becomes of [the souls of the dead]; at least we have never been able to draw this information out of them'. Note, however, that he readily admits to having little experience with the people themselves, and grants that he and his colleagues might 'learn more if we were to live among them or they among us. At the present time they are greatly separated from us by inaccessible hills, so that we see them rarely and only when they come by sea to trade with the French' (ibid.). So, in addition to sheer lack of interaction, missionaries might dismiss what they see as 'trifling nonsense', thus minimizing any association with 'anything heavenly'.

The assumptions or claims that traditional societies lack a genuine or 'full' religion have not gone away. For example, some social scientific discussions of contemporary small-scale populations make these claims, although they stem from different motives than earlier observations. Other researchers similarly characterize traditions such as Buddhism as a 'non-theistic' religion

2 Elsewhere, Sperber and Boyer discuss that the term 'religion' itself is useless and 'like aether and phlogiston, belongs in the ash-heap of scientific history' (http://cognitionandculture.net/blog/pascals-blog/why-would-otherwise-intelligent-scholars-believe-in). By sticking with our earlier conception, we are more aligned with Rappaport's sentiments.

when all evidence points to the contrary. In the remainder of this section, we discuss these examples and attend to some counterevidence to such claims.

The Hadza

The Hadza are one of the most intensively studied small-scale populations in the world. Located in Tanzania, some Hadza communities have retained their foraging lifeways, while others have been incorporated into the market economy. But even Hadza foragers are increasingly influenced by market economies and tourism, and their territories continue to be pressured by neighbouring groups. Celebrated ethnographer James Woodburn (1982, 190) notes that: 'The Hadza link death and burial with their major religious celebration, the sacred *epeme* dance performed in pitch darkness each month ... Failure to hold the dance is believed to be dangerous. Performing the dance is believed to maintain and promote general well-being, above all good health and successful hunting.' He wagers that these traditions 'might provide a starting-point for elaboration into a set of systematic beliefs about fertility and regeneration in death but the evidence does not, I think, support the idea that such a set of systematic beliefs has already developed' (204). Here, Woodburn suggests a kind of primitive religion that does not quite yet have the degree of formalism in terms of beliefs that fully formed traditions would.

Following this, anthropologist Frank Marlowe (2010, 61) notes that after asking one man 'if there was only one god or several, he thought about it for a while, then said he was not quite sure. This sums up much about Hadza religion.' However, he continues:

> I think one can say the Hadza do have religion, certainly a cosmology anyway, but it bears little resemblance to what most of us in complex societies (with Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.) think of as religion. There are no churches, preachers, leaders, or religious guardians, no idols or images of gods, no regular organized meetings, no religious morality, no belief in an afterlife – theirs is nothing like the major religions. All the beliefs and rituals associated with the *epeme* dance and *epeme* meat eating are at the heart of Hadza religion. (Marlowe 2010, 61)

Here, Marlowe simply contrasts the religiosity of the major world traditions with Hadza beliefs and practices, as though what 'most of us in complex societies' know as religion is some kind of reliable measuring stick. However, posing a similar question about the nature of the Trinity, for instance, to a lay Catholic, is likely to yield a similar uncertainty if not a similar kind of verbal

shrug. In the same spirit, others have characterized the Hadza as being 'minimally religious' and 'having little belief in omniscient, moralizing gods' (Apicella 2018; Smith et al. 2018).

However, others whose research efforts have focused specifically on Hadza religion suggest a rich religious life including multiple rituals, spirits, cosmological beliefs, and practices (Power and Watts 1997; Power 2015; Skaanes 2015; 2017a; 2017b). The solitary study (Apicella 2018) that collected discrete quantitative data on the topic suggests that the vast majority of the sampled Hadza believe in – at least – two deities (only two were asked about, however) (Figure 53.1). Of the believers, 82 per cent also said that *Haine* (represented by the moon) and *Ishoko* (represented by the sun) are the same god, only 7.4 per cent of the sample claims that these gods do not exist, and 5.9 per cent claimed not to know if either exist. A total of 85.4 per cent of those who answered (n = 48) claimed to engage in rituals devoted to *Haine*, whereas virtually the same proportion (85.7 per cent; n = 35) reported engaging in rites devoted to pleasing *Ishoko*.

A more specific look at beliefs suggests that most responses about these deities are largely conceived of as punitive, moralistic, and knowledgeable (Apicella 2018). Figure 53.2 illustrates the distributions of these data (see Purzycki et al. 2016 for the codebook). Here, modal responses for both deities are positive for the knowledge and punishment scores, whereas the mode for moral interest questions are positive for *Haine* (dark grey) but negative for *Ishoko* (white) and the distribution is roughly uniform across answer options. Furthermore, there is no reliable indication that exposure to Christianity is associated with such beliefs (Purzycki et al., n.d.; Stagnaro et al., in press).

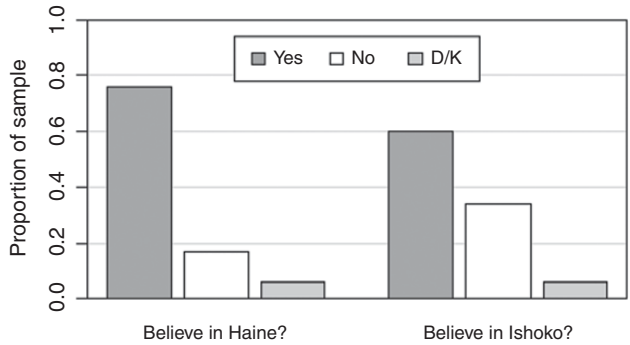

Figure 53.1 Distribution of belief in *Haine* and *Ishoko* among a Hadza sample (n = 68). D/K refers to 'I don't know'. Values are from Apicella (2018).

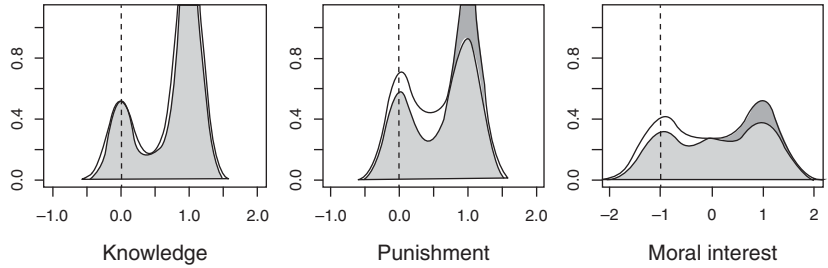

Figure 53.2 Density plots of Hadza claims about the breadth of knowledge, punishment, and moral interests of *Haine* (dark grey) and *Ishoko* (white). Scores for knowledge and punishment are the means of two binary questions (no = 0; yes = 1) and the moral interest scores are means of three (no = –2; I don't know = 0; yes = 2). Reference lines denote the minimum possible values. Sample sizes vary across questions and deity (min. = 32, max. = 44).

As for their Hadza behaviours, *epeme* and the *maitoko* are of central importance. *Epeme* can refer to the ritual, individuals who have been successfully initiated into the otherwise secretive rituals, prestigious parts of meat surrounded with taboos and norms regarding its consumption, and a deity. According to one account, individuals can formally express others' transgressions during the *epeme* ceremony (Skaanes 2017a, 107). Some of Apicella's informants suggest that the Hadza engage in this tradition 'for themselves, not a god . . . [Moreover,] nothing bad will happen if they do not do the dance, it can be used to bring rain and good fortune, to heal the sick, and to make people happy' (Apicella 2018, 137). However, Skaanes (2017a, 108) details how people dance for spirits where 'a dancer communicates for whom it is that he is going to dance. This makes the spirit of the person he dances for enter the body of the dancer through his head, and the dancer becomes a vessel for the spirit of the one in whose name he dances.' Participation in these rituals requires a certain level of maturity, and there are ritual specialists who have exhibited specific behaviours of initiation. Relationships forged in the *epeme* ritual predict sustained cooperative behaviours (Hill et al. 2014).

In summary, then, contrary to some portraits, Hadza traditions – many of which are conducted in secret – are demographically structured in important ways, they create and maintain relationships, and are deeply intertwined with the Hadza cosmos and social order. In other words, the Hadza are indeed a religious society with many indicators of spirits and practices that can foster cooperative relationships that help maintain their communities.

The Pirahã

The Pirahã of Brazil have gained some notoriety through the various efforts of ethnolinguist Daniel Everett (2005, 2008, 2009). In a chapter entitled 'Material culture and the absence of ritual', Everett (2008) characterizes the Pirahã as having a 'relative lack of ritual', which he refers to as 'a set of prescribed actions with symbolic significance for the culture' (71–84). Even if we maintain Everett's definition, he provides various points of evidence to the contrary. For example, the Pirahã make necklaces 'to ward off spirits and to look more attractive' (74). The Pirahã also bury their dead. According to Everett, however, 'there is little [ritual] that we can describe with this term' associated with the burials. Yet, Everett acknowledges that the Pirahã have 'loosely followed traditions surrounding the burial' and sometimes 'the dead are buried in a sitting position with many of their belongings placed beside them' (82). While both the necklace and burial consist of sets of 'prescribed actions with symbolic significance for the culture', Everett distances these practices from 'ritual'.

Everett ponders that 'the activity closest to ritual among the Pirahãs is their dancing [which brings] the village together. They are often marked by promiscuity, fun, laughing, and merriment' (2008, 83). There is also a 'dance in which live venomous snakes are used'. In it, a man dresses up as an evil spirit and emerges from the jungle while singing about his lack of fear and dwelling place in the jungle. He then proceeds to throw the snake at observers who 'scramble away quickly' (84). Everett suggests that 'Such dances might be classified as a weak form of ritual, in the sense that they are witnessed and imitated and clearly have value and meaning to the community' (84). Yet, Everett also observes that 'On many rainless nights, a high falsetto voice can be heard from the jungle . . . it is taken by all the Pirahãs in the village to be a *kaoáibógí*, or fast mouth [spirit]. The voice gives the villagers suggestions and advice, as on how to spend the next day, or on possible night dangers' (139). Everett entered the jungle to confront the man doing this, who on the following day denied it, under the assumption of some form of spiritual possession. This description ends with Everett musing: 'Very puzzling, I thought' (ibid.).

Elsewhere, Everett (2005, 139) claims that the Pirahã 'have no creation stories or myths'[3] (632). However, there is evidence from ethnographers suggesting that there are many stories and characters about a mythic time (Gonçalves 1990, 2000; Everett 2009; Nevins et al. 2009a, 2009b), including rituals conducted under the auspices of spirits, and an active shamanic

3 Here it is unclear whether or not Everett claims they have no creation stories at all or neither creation stories nor myths. See below for how the conversation devolves.

tradition. According to Gonçalves (2000), the Pirahã religious worldview includes a multi-tiered cosmology, including an afterlife in which spirits 'compete for the responsibility to appear in [a] shamanic ritual' for naming people. The Pirahã spiritual landscape is full of various spirits and mythical beings. Other sources suggest that there are two major festivals that take place and both have the 'intention of provoking sounds, making a noise, sufficient for the demiurge Igagai, dwelling on the second celestial level, to hear them, becoming aware of their existence and of the exact place where they are found':

> The Pirahã's [sic] worry that they may not be being located by Igagai can be interpreted as a fear of a repetition of what is contained in a mythic fragment narrating the destruction of the world. This destruction was due in the final instance to the fact Igagai was unaware where the Pirahã were. It was only through the crying of women, who were alone and without fire, that Igagai was then able to hear and locate them and start reconstruction of the world. (Gonçalves 2000; cf. Nevins et al. 2009b)

By Everett's (2005, 632) estimation, Gonçalves' work is 'the most reliable ever done by an anthropologist, but one simply cannot come to the best conclusions about Pirahã meanings working through the medium of the very poor Portuguese of Pirahã informants. Gonçalves based much of his research on work with two Pirahã informants whose Portuguese was somewhat better than that of most Pirahã.' Gonçalves acknowledges that he had to piece together what he calls 'a cosmology without myths' and 'where the ideas of the Pirahãs about the cosmos gain consistency is in ritual and the dreams that are in fact [believed to be] lived experiences. It is this thinking that they elaborate via ritual discourse and dreams that would be the equivalent of myths in other Amazonian cultures' (cited in Everett 2009, 431). Everett (ibid.) concludes: 'the Pirahãs are repeating back amalgams of many of the stories that they have "pieced together" over the years from caboclo [ethnically mixed] traders who share in the myths that pervade almost all Amazonian societies. These are not indigenous.' Here, Everett concludes that the Pirahã had to learn these myths from outsiders, but the requirement that myths be exclusively indigenous is entirely arbitrary. The Pirahã do entertain such stories, and having them suggests how embedded they are in a greater Amazonian tradition (see Nevins et al. 2009b, 392–4).

If we focus on beliefs in spiritual beings and rituals devoted to them, the Pirahã are far from non-religious. Moreover, their ritual lives strongly suggest patterned behaviour under the influence of spirits, including possession and

transformation. These rites are not merely 'a set of prescribed actions with symbolic significance for the culture' as defined by Everett. Rather, they are practices that are clearly linked to influencing spirits' temperaments. In summary, the Pirahã, too, are religious.

Are Small-scale Societies Lacking 'Moralistic' Traditions?

These examples are not unique (e.g. see Johnson 2003; Izquierdo et al. 2008 for similar discussion of attitudes towards the Matsigenka of Peru). Moreover, a related debate concerns not whether some small-scale populations lack religion, but whether these populations lack some specific *component* of religion. In fact, one of the most contested current debates in the evolutionary science of religion concerns whether or not small-scale societies had 'moralistic' or 'prosocial' religions prior to contact with the Abrahamic or other world religious traditions (Boehm 2008; Beheim et al., in press; Purzycki 2011; Johnson 2015; Watts et al. 2015; Norenzayan et al. 2016; Whitehouse et al. 2019). On one side of the debate, Norenzayan (2013, 127) suggests that 'ancestral religions did not have a clear moral dimension'. On the other side, Johnson (2015) rejects the idea that the gods of small-scale populations lack moralistic supernatural punishment.[4] Both draw upon the same cross-cultural work (e.g. Swanson 1960; Boehm 2008; Peoples and Marlowe 2012), yet arrive at different conclusions. If we define morality as norms of prosocial behaviour that entail a cost or benefit to others (Alexander 1987; Purzycki et al. 2018), do traditional religions truly lack 'a clear moral dimension'?

The San peoples of the Kalahari are often purported to maintain a religious tradition that lacks morality. Marshall (1962, 245) writes that 'Man's wrong-doing against man is not left to ≠*Gao!na*'s [a deity] punishment nor is it considered to be his concern. Man corrects or avenges such wrong-doings himself in his social context' (cf. Katz 1982, 30). This oft-quoted passage (e.g. Wright 2009; Peoples and Marlowe 2012; Norenzayan 2013) portrays the San

4 The debates stem from whether or not religion can push prosociality beyond cooperation with kin and reciprocal relations. Norenzayan posits that moralistic, punitive, and omniscient gods can help promote the kinds of cooperation seen in state societies. As small-scale societies lack such gods, the reasoning goes, they are not as likely to become large without other mechanisms in place. Johnson, however, denies that small-scale societies lack such deities, and that general supernatural punishment can work well enough (though his focus is on general cooperation rather than its expansion beyond traditional boundaries). See discussion below describing how religious ritual facilitates cooperation between foraging camps.

as ultimately self-regulating and therefore a punitive moralistic deity is functionally unnecessary. However, there are a few compelling lines of evidence that warrant scepticism of this claim as a whole.

First, *≠Gao!na* is reported to punish people both directly and indirectly. In the same article, Marshall (1962) reports that this deity can punish people for demonstrating their own dominance, taking honey, and accidentally shooting and eating a gemsbok that was *≠Gao!na* in disguise. While these might not be construed as 'moral', it is evidence that this god is thought to punish people. Moreover, the San regularly plead with this deity to end suffering and to bring food and water to the community (Katz 1982, 30–1). Despite little evidence that *≠Gao!na* is explicitly concerned with the kinds of moral expectations found in the Abrahamic traditions, he is a dominant agent that commands respect. As there is no reliable evidence beyond the speculation of ethnographers, the question remains open as to whether or not dominant, powerful deities that are explicitly moralistic are more effective at increasing cooperation than dominant, powerful deities associated with other forms of behaviour.

The second line of evidence is the fact that *other* San spirits are reported as caring about human moral behaviour; they intervene in order to reduce and/or exacerbate moral relationships (Lee 2003, 129–30), are the subject of a rich body of mythical morality tales (Guenther 1999), and are the targets of rituals conducted in an 'emotional climate of "dense moral interaction"' where local conflicts are resolved (Guenther 1979). These spirits, the *//gauwasi*, are either the children of the gods or spirits of deceased San. During the San trance dancing rituals, a 'dancer may pointedly address himself to issues of tension in the group, and berate individuals or the group collectively for their quarreling and urge them to reconcile' (Guenther 1999, 195).

In addition to facilitating this intragroup harmony, aspects of these rites also build bridges *between* camps and – as these rituals are thought to be quite effective in healing by non-San – other South African ethnic groups. Katz (1982, 207) reports one dance that was attended by neighbouring camps 'despite the fact there is a major, ongoing argument between the two larger camps over a prospective divorce, the wife coming from one of the camps, the husband from the other'. This dispute was acted out, replete with name-calling and debate between the two camp members. After a while, 'they agree[d] to resolve their differences, at least for a time', then proceeded to sit together, ultimately laughing and dancing in unison (208). In sum, not only do the San have very clear moral dimensions to their religious traditions, but

there is evidence that their traditions can forge bonds beyond parochial boundaries.

Atheistic Buddhism?

Similar – and old – claims exist regarding Buddhism's alleged lack of deities, moralistic or otherwise (see Kavanagh and Jong 2019 for a review). From general theorists William James (1958 [1902]) and Émile Durkheim (2001 [1915]) to generations of scholars of Buddhism (de Bary 1969; Rahula 1974), many continue to maintain the view that Buddhism is somehow an 'atheistic religion' or lacking in spiritual agents. While much of the contemporary scholarship accepts that Buddhism is replete with spiritual devotions (Obeyesekere 1991; Orrù and Wang 1992; Pyysiäinen 2003), some maintain the stance that Buddhism lacks gods 'in the Abrahamic sense' (Schlieter 2014), calling contrary claims 'merely an invention of 19th century Buddhist modernists' (Stausberg 2005, 150). As discussed earlier, the difficulty with making progress in such conversations is that scholars appear to be focusing on different analytical levels ranging between doctrine, the laity, and religious specialists.

Spiro (1982), for example, describes the Theravada Buddhism he encountered in villages of upper Burma (now Myanmar) as atheistic. Yet, he acknowledges that '[t]here are, to be sure, numerous gods in Buddhism' and that 'Buddhism might be called polytheistic' (Spiro 1982, xii). Indeed, he argues that gods become necessary in Buddhism because Buddhist explanations for suffering, which place 'responsibility for suffering exclusively on the sufferer', are 'less than satisfying emotionally' (Spiro 1996, 4). Consequently, offloading personal pain into the supernatural realm provides a more appealing and compelling account of human suffering. Spiro's extensive ethnographic work in Burma (1982, 1996) details widespread beliefs in witches, nats, ghosts, and demons, and corresponding ritual activities that engage with these supernatural agents, including festivals, exorcisms, and possessions. Other traditions explicitly treat Buddha(s) as god(s).

For example, East Asian Pure Land Buddhists (Mochizuki 1999; Stevenson 2007) are committed to a doctrine of a post-life salvation through devotional practices explicitly devoted to Buddhas associated with heavenly domains. Among many of the Buddhist laity in the Tyva Republic (Siberia), Buddha is a moralistic, punitive deity that has a hand in what happens to people after they die. In one study (Purzycki and Holland 2019), when participants were asked to freely list things that anger Buddha, most listed violations of moral behaviour and lack of virtue. A majority claimed that Buddha knows more

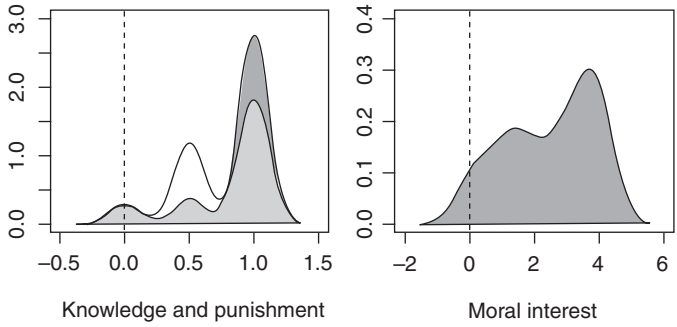

Figure 53.3 Density plots of Tyvans' (n = 81) claims about the breadth of knowledge (left panel, dark grey), punishment (left panel, white), and moral interests (right panel) of Buddha. Scores for knowledge and punishment are the means of two binary questions (no = 0; yes = 1) and the moral interest scores are means of three items on a five-point scale (0–4). Reference lines denote the minimum possible values.

than normal humans, which technically is not far from doctrine, since he attained Enlightenment. However, Tyvans also claim that he actively punishes people and maintains an interest in humans' moral conduct. Figure 53.3 illustrates the distribution of responses to these questions. Out of a sample of seventy-nine individuals, sixty (76 per cent) reported that they performed rituals devoted to Buddha. In summary, while Buddhist doctrine may posit no deities, devoted Buddhists nevertheless may engage in rituals directed towards spirits, and even conceive of Buddha as a punitive, morally interested god who is the target of rituals.

Doubting, Subverting, and Resisting Tradition

Despite the questions lingering as a result of the within- and across-group variation exhibited in the ethnographic record, the above examples suggest that it is unlikely that religious traditions – especially traditions that modulate interpersonal and intergroup relationships – are absent from traditional contexts. In order to reach something more substantively conclusive, we might learn more if we actively examine such questions with fieldwork and listen to what traditional people have to say about such matters. Nevertheless, as Goody suggested, doubt and resistance remain equally universal. What varies across groups is how people express doubt and resistance to tradition. In what follows, we examine evidence of resistance to religion in small-scale societies in the ethnographic record.

Azande Witchcraft

Consider, for instance, Evans-Pritchard's (1976) observations of the Azande, where scepticism towards witch doctors was quite common: 'Absence of formal and coercive doctrines permit Azande to state that many, even most, witch-doctors are frauds . . . Faith and scepticism are alike traditional' (107). Resonating with Goody's sentiments, Evans-Pritchard finds that commitment and rejection coexist, but in a curious way: the Azande do not reject witchcraft *in toto*. Quite the contrary; while the Azande are well aware of ritualized sleights of hand and therefore sceptical about the abilities of many witch doctors, they nevertheless believe in witchcraft.

Much like popular notions of 'luck', what help maintain witchcraft beliefs are the vicissitudes of life; general misfortune and illness, coupled with the inevitable strife that comes with being a hypersocial animal, provides enough 'evidence' of witchcraft. Yet, few if any Azande claim to know precisely how witchcraft works (Evans-Pritchard 1976, 31); they just know that ill-will between people can cause misfortune and illness and that witchcraft is made possible by a specific fluid in witches' bodies. The Azande can see this fluid only upon an individual's death during processing the bodies of the deceased, thus prolonging the possibility of obtaining 'evidence' of being a witch.

Evans-Pritchard noted that upon asking an Azande if he were a witch, he would not respond with righteous indignation like he might if asked if he were a thief or murderer. Instead, an Azande might express hope that it isn't him who is causing misfortune to others and might point to the lack of evidence of the witchcraft fluid in his deceased ancestors. When witchcraft becomes especially troubling – for it is always afoot – rather than confidently take matters into their own hands, people consult a variety of oracular devices to provide hints as to the source of witchcraft. Azande might make a public appeal, noting the oracles informed them who the source of witchcraft was, but they do not publicly state who it is out of a courtesy they hope will be reciprocated by the witch (Evans-Pritchard 1976, 39). When the alleged witch is confronted, he typically apologizes and expresses that if he is a witch, he does not mean to intentionally cause harm and proceeds to ritualistically 'cool' any witchcraft fluid inside of him. Despite widespread belief in the tradition, it remains saturated with the acknowledgement of ignorance and suspicion of ritual experts.

Ilahita Arapesh

Like the Azande, the Ilahita Arapesh of Papua New Guinea evince a curious coexistence of commitment and rejection of the supernatural realm. In

a series of extraordinary ethnographies, Donald Tuzin (1976, 1980, 1997) describes the Tambaran, a secret male cult of the Ilahita and other Arapesh communities. The Tambaran consists of a brutal five-stage male initiation rite, lavish male feasts, and various sacrifices to the spirits. For Ilahita males, the Tambaran is 'a total way of life' (1980, 325). The Tambaran cult terrorizes both women and young male initiates, and often denies them much-needed food, especially meat. Tuzin documents that the men were fully aware that the Tambaran was a fiction and its spirits were not real. Indeed, the men expressed considerable guilt and remorse about deceiving the women. Husbands, to alleviate their guilt, would often secretly provide their wives with meat that should have been offered to the Tambaran spirits, telling their wives that the spirits were no longer hungry.

The Tambaran cult was ultimately dismantled by the Ilahita. Specifically, the men publicly admitted to the women that the Tambaran spirits were not real and that the entire cult had been an elaborate deception. Given the misogynistic inclinations of the Tambaran, the men feared the women's response, but the response they received was more surprising than anything they had imagined. The women claimed that they were well aware that the Tambaran had always been a hoax, yet they played along to satisfy the men. Thus, we are presented with a remarkable spectacle: a religious system in which all adult parties involved seemed to understand it as a fabrication.

However, the situation was not so simple. As Tuzin describes, '[t]he men's confession also carried a warning, which was that in a truer sense the Tambaran was not a hoax at all. The spirit venerated in the cult was and is real; its power was lethal in the past, and it could kill again' (1997, 1). The death of the Tambaran was partially fuelled by a Revivalist movement, whose Christian beliefs and doctrines ultimately reordered Ilahita lives. The Revivalists did not claim that the Tambaran spirits were not real; rather, they were depicted as quite real, but Satanic. As is often the case, religions create the problem and offer the solution: Jesus was superior and would protect the Ilahita from the Tambaran's demonic spirits.

Clowns, Tricksters, Fools, and Their Festivals

Many traditions around the world incorporate a certain level of tolerance for rejection – if not outright desecration – of their own values and customs in the form of mythical tricksters, sacred clowns, and festivals of disorder. In myth, tricksters are clever-but-foolish taboo-breaking-but-likeable anti-heroes who are typically responsible for the creation of humans and their

more important cultural developments, like language, hunting technology, and ritual traditions (Hyde 1998; Erdoes and Ortiz 1999).

In practice, ritual clowns disrupt sacred ceremonies, defile sacred artefacts, violate norms, and generally represent agents of chaos and disorder. Among the Mexican Mayo, for example, clown 'behavior involves a fascination with oral behavior, eating bread, feces, etc., and with anal behavior, with goosing or jabbing other [clowns] in the anus and with "defecating" upon sacred objects' (Crumrine 1969, 7). Throughout Polynesia, ritual clowns traditionally ridiculed chiefs and ritual specialists with impunity (Hereniko 1994). Many Native American traditions include clowns who disrupt ritual orders, perform rituals in reverse fashion, and adopt contrary lifestyles in everyday life as part of their sacred roles (Plant 1994; 2010). As Bricker writes of the Native Americans of highland Chiapas, although they 'do distinguish between sacred and profane acts and have a clear sense of what is sacrilege and what is not, this distinction is not equivalent to a distinction between the solemn and the comic, as is often the case in our own society. Thus humor and religious ritual need not be mutually exclusive with respect to setting' (Bricker 1973, 10).

In a similar way, many festivals celebrate disorder, indulgence, and the rejection of normalcy. The western European 'Feast of Fools' consisted of chaotic church masses replete with cross-dressing, singing obscene songs, eating blood sausage, and gambling at the altar, and the throwing of animal excrement at passers-by (Bourke 1891, 11–23; cf. Harris 2011). Writing about the corrosive quality that humour had on the hierarchy of medieval Europe, Bakhtin (1984, 88–9) writes that 'laughter make[s] no exception for the upper stratum, but indeed it is usually directed toward it . . . One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state . . . [laughter has an] indissoluble and essential relation to freedom.' The fact that there was a persistent and deeply historical repression of humour in the western religious traditions suggests that even the powerful can fear mirth (Sanders 1995; cf. Resnick 2016).[5]

5 While the Hebrew bible and Rabbinic literature are replete with humour including wordplay and examples of humans besting and entertaining God (Friedman and Friedman 2014), scholars also recognize the tension between the god of Abraham and humour, and point to a common pool of indices. For example, Ecclesiastes 7:4 states that 'the heart of fools is in the house of mirth'. Luke 6:22 notes that 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh [in heaven]'. Benedict of Aniane (747–821) writes that 'the Lord condemns those who laugh now' and 'there is never a time for laughter for the faithful soul' (cited in Resnick 2016, 93; Sanders 1995, 130). Writing in the 1120–40s, Hughes de Saint-Victor (1648, 100), a Christian priest and theologian, observed that expressing joy may be good or bad, depending on its source, but laughter is always evil (*risus omnimodo malus est*).

Such figures and events may reinforce adherence to the very norms they violate (or conversely, normalcy may reinforce the importance of rebellion; Turner 1995). They are demonstrations of how *not* to behave normally; they exhibit or are exhibitions of excess, gluttony, indulgence, sexual freedom, and the violations of general expectations. However, clowns and tricksters who have licence to be critical of the otherwise infallible, and to point out the folly in taking things and people – including one's self – too seriously, may function more to equalize others and humanize those in power rather than reaffirm their roles (Hereniko 1994). As these figures and events represent novelty, creation, and evolution, they are widely recognized as catalysts for change rather than maintainers of the status quo (Hyde 1998).

Future Horizons in the Study of Traditional Non-belief

In this chapter we have discussed the question of religious non-commitment among societies that largely fall outside the common sampling schemes of most social scientists. We argued that contrary to long-standing narratives, there remains no society that lacks religion; even the prototypical examples of non- or minimally religious societies or atheistic traditions show the contrary. When researchers privilege targeted inquiry over casual observation it is clear that these societies exhibit forms of religiosity. We also discussed some ways in which people variously express doubt and resistance to tradition, showing that the two appear to go hand-in-hand. Resistance and doubt in traditional societies certainly has room for further inquiry.

In fact, we think it is no exaggeration to say that just about every aspect of the social science of (non)belief in traditional societies needs more attention if it is to be of use to understanding the human experience. While ignorance, doubt, and apathy are ubiquitous, atheism, and agnosticism as formal identities are not likely to be present among traditional societies; atheism as an organizational identity probably exists primarily as a response to, and therefore in competition with, theism. If traditional societies primarily emphasize behavioural over ideological commitment, atheism is not likely to arise if people are already relatively apathetic about believing in the existence of gods. Rather, incentives and ideological motivations in a context of competition are likely to contribute to the rise of atheism or non-commitment.

Take, for example, one ethnographic case study of atheists in India (Copeman and Quack 2017). In response to the religious tradition of cremation and the expenses of mortuary rites (including the feeding of upper caste

Brahmins), atheists have organized to donate their bodies to science and rhetorically package donations with signals of how much more virtuous and selfless the act is in comparison to the religious alternatives. Moreover, when benefits from a secular source outweigh those from a religious source, we should expect a reduction in religious commitment, unless religious systems acclimate to the novel conditions. Among the Shuar of Ecuador, access to secular medicine appears to be decreasing the likelihood of soliciting shamans as a first choice of healthcare (Blackwell 2009). Additional cross-cultural work is needed to explore the impacts of secular medicine on traditional healing practices, with particular focus on the impacts that reliance on secular medicine has on religious beliefs and practices.

Future work must also assess the ubiquity of religious non-commitment in traditional societies. Despite sophisticated and well-coordinated survey apparatuses, we barely have reliable rates of belief in state-level societies, let alone in traditional populations. Recent attempts (Gervais and Najle 2018) use clever methods to uncover the more reliable estimates of the prevalence of atheists in the United States (where admitting doubt is relatively taboo), but how useful these methods would be in traditional contexts remains unexamined.

Research will also need to ensure that such measures of commitment reliably account for variation in how people express a lack of commitment. If the target of inference is individual-level *general* non-religiousness, one must take any taboos or restrictions into account, otherwise it may be incorrectly assumed that people aren't committed to particular spirits or lack religion entirely. In other words, having a better grasp of the religious landscape in communities is necessary to assess how commitments vary. Many reasons abound as to why one would express non-belief in gods, ranging from taboo, irrelevance, competition in religious markets, and actual non-belief. This complicates the ability to obtain accurate estimates of non-belief across populations and traditions within those populations (e.g. people might secretly not believe in God, but have an unshakeable faith in the existence of ghosts). Yet, to advance the study of non-belief in traditional societies, such information is essential. We are hopeful that careful and creative ethnographic work can begin to provide the appropriate data.

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Barnett Endowment for support. Data used in this chapter can be accessed at https://github.com/bgpurzycki/Evolution-of-Religion-and-Morality/blob/master/CERC%20Dataset%20(Wave%201)%20Version%206.0.csv. Code to reproduce the images is available at https://gist.github.com/bgpurzycki/ed2c6ed7ccdb1feacb740bee2c858460.

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PART VIII

EMERGING ATHEISMS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

54

New Atheism

CHRISTOPHER R. COTTER

> There is simply no programme or manifesto of 'New Atheism' and there is no all-embracing organization, in which all, or even most, of the so-labelled persons are united.
>
> *(Zenk 2013, 255)*

The first decade of the twenty-first century in the anglophone west witnessed the emergence of a scholarly, but largely journalistic, discourse surrounding a 'New Atheism'. As the above quotation from Thomas Zenk suggests, 'New Atheism' is frequently in the eye of the beholder and specifying what is to be included under this wobbly umbrella is far from a simple task. The term is most frequently understood as applying to some popular texts by four men – Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens – with some other voices, such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Ariane Sherine, Herman Philipse, Sikivu Hutchinson, Alom Shaha, and Michel Onfray adding elements of diversity into this predominantly English-speaking, white, cis-het boys' club. However, New Atheism can also be viewed as a more diffuse 'political movement, expressed through forms of secularist activism' offering 'provocative contributions on issues such as security, multi-culturalism, gender, education and the relationship between the state and civil society' (McAnulla et al. 2018, 1). It has even been suggested that 'somewhere on the order of 13 to 16 million Americans exhibit 'New Atheist' characteristics (Cragun 2015, 210). In this chapter, I begin with these definitional issues before focusing on the work of the aforementioned 'Four Horsemen', delineating aspects of their critique of religion and some of the more constructive aspects of their atheism(s). I then address the question of what is new (and not so new) about the New Atheism and why it emerged when it did, and conclude with some reflections on contemporary issues and debates surrounding gender, ethnicity, and the potential legacy of this discursive movement.

Defining New Atheism

The appellation 'New Atheism' is generally traced to Gary Wolf's 2006 article 'The church of the non-believers' in *Wired* magazine, although Alister McGrath hinted at its emergence a couple of years earlier (Cotter 2011; Zenk 2013). It is common-sensically seen as a form of atheism that has emerged following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, yet New Atheism is an analytically vague 'umbrella term, which has originated in the public discourse of the Western world during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and which has been, and still is, used to describe several social actors and phenomena' (Zenk 2013, 245). The term has gained traction across the globe – from German *Neuer Atheismus* to Polish *Nowy Ateizm* (Zenk 2013, 251) – and might be defined in terms of central figures (e.g. the Four Horsemen), ideas (e.g. a threefold commitment to atheism, naturalism, and irreligion), discursive tone, and so on. I'll say more on these below, as well as addressing the obvious question of what a supposed 'old' atheism from which 'new' atheism is differentiated might look like. However, I take my lead from Thomas Zenk's discursive rather than stipulative approach to the term.

In this view, New Atheism is not a specific thing so much as a discourse that has emerged at a specific point in history, clustered around the work of a few prominent authors, with diffuse effects spread throughout online discourse, material culture, political rhetoric, and more. Yet, Zenk concludes that the term suffers from several conceptual weaknesses, lying in the realm of 'discursive politics' without a clear definition, differing 'from the self-identification of those labelled as such' (although 'New Atheist' has been taken up as an identifier in some quarters) and, as a primarily journalistic term, it carries negative connotations in public discourse 'that cannot be subtracted from the label' (Zenk 2013, 257–8), and which frequently bleed over into less-than-objective academic treatments. This broader context should be kept in mind as I turn more specifically to the Four Horsemen in the following sections, before broadening my focus once more towards the end.

The Four Horsemen

Although it is unclear who is responsible for the appellation 'The Four Horsemen' (Cotter 2011, 83), it has become an established convention referring to Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens, and was even used as the title for a film of the only

meeting between the four men – recorded in 2007 and somewhat bizarrely published in written form some twelve years later. The five texts most commonly considered in the New Atheist canon were published in the years 2004–7: Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006), Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), Harris' *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (2004) and *Letter to a Christian Nation: A Challenge to the Faith of America* (2006), and Hitchens' *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). Although these authors shall be considered as a body, it is worth noting that despite many commonalities and historical particularities that resulted in them being considered together, each of their atheisms is idiosyncratic and reflects their personal biographies.

Sam Harris (1967–present), American philosopher and neuroscientist, is the youngest of the four men considered here, 'and – unlike the others – only became a public figure following *The End of Faith*'s becoming a surprise, and controversial, bestseller' (Zenk 2013, 247). Since this initial success, and short follow-up 'Letter', Harris has attempted (with moderate success) to keep himself in the spotlight with more constructive texts seeking to demonstrate how morality can be derived from science (2007's *The Moral Landscape*), to disrupt our notions of *Free Will* (2012), to challenge readers to tell the truth in situations where society condones lying (2013's *Lying*), and providing his own rationalist seeker narrative in *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (2015). Initially directing his attention towards the perceived threat of Islam, Harris' atheism is concerned with violence, the problem of faith, and the complicity of religious 'moderates' in 'surrounding religion with a kind of protective layer, and thereby, unwittingly shielding the more extreme forms of religion' (Zenk 2013, 247).

Daniel Dennett (1942–present) is an American philosopher and cognitive scientist, and might be seen as a more reluctant participant in the New Atheist movement. As a tenured professor at Tufts, he has a long publishing history dealing with the (evolution of the) mind, including *Consciousness Explained* (1993), *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (1996), *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (2014), and, most recently *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (2018). In *Breaking the Spell* he provides a tentative definition of religion that is suggestive of some cursory engagement with the academic study of religion (2007, 9), as well as engaging with the work of some canonical figures such as Emile Durkheim and William James, and admits that his knowledge of non-monotheistic religion is too limited to permit writing 'with any confidence about them' (2007, xi–xii). The 'spell' Dennett aims to break is the taboo surrounding

subjecting religious systems to scientific scrutiny, and although his call for religion to be subjected to 'the most intensive multidisciplinary research we can muster, calling on the best minds on the planet' (2007, 14) is admirable, it seems to blatantly ignore over a century of just such research from within religious studies, sociology, anthropology, history, psychology, cognitive science, and more. Dennett has taken a foray into such research himself in recent years, working with Linda LaScola on *Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (2015), a study of the struggles of Jewish and Christian leaders who have come to positions of atheism that seem incompatible with the content of their public preaching.

With the late Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011) things take a less scientific, more literary and journalistic turn. The English-American author, essayist, journalist, and social critic was the author of a number of books, including biographies of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and George Orwell, and some explicitly critical of religion, including his famous take-down of Mother Teresa in *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (1995), and an edited collection of atheistic writings from George Eliot to Salman Rushdie in *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Non-Believer* (2007). Hitchens died from oesophageal cancer in 2011, but continued to engage in high-profile debates in the months before his death – notably on whether religion was a force for good with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in November 2010 – and a posthumously published collection of essays, 2012's *Mortality*, documented how he 'remained true to his positive atheism even in the face of death' (Zenk 2013, 250). The anti-religious account articulated in *God Is Not Great* is 'non-systematic, [but] all-embracing: it includes not only the (Abrahamic) theistic religions and deism – as in Dawkins' case – but also Mormonism, Hinduism, and – unlike Harris – Buddhism' (Zenk 2013, 250), and is filled with anecdotes and stories from his rich experience as a foreign correspondent, prolific writer, and enjoyer of life.

Finally, we turn to British biologist and ethnologist Richard Dawkins (1941–present), the most famous and still prolifically anti-religious of the group. Dawkins was until 2008 the Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University and has been a well-known public face of evolutionary biology since the publication of *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Since then, he has published several popular books demystifying evolutionary theory and promoting rationalism, including *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), *Unweaving the Rainbow* (1998), and *The Ancestor's Tale* (2004), as well as a collection of essays, *A Devil's Chaplain*, in 2003. *The God Delusion* is very much a continuation of Dawkins' previous works, albeit placing the focus

explicitly on religion, and treating the existence of God as a scientific hypothesis that can be tested (and rejected) like any other. This line of reasoning continues in his recently published *Outgrowing God: A Beginner's Guide* (2019), a book ostensibly directed towards children and breaking the link of family transmission of religion. Here, in the first section, the reader is walked through a collection of points he has made over the years – most of us are atheists regarding most gods, we shouldn't ascribe (non-)religious identities to children, the God of the Old Testament is nasty, the New Testament notion of atonement is awful, we use criteria from outside the Bible to assess its moral worth, etc. The second section of the book turns, as one would expect, to evolutionary theory, making the broad points that design is improbable, a designer even more improbable, and that common sense oftentimes fails in the face of empirical research. Dawkins also founded the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science in 2006, with a mission to remove religion's influence on science education and public policy and destigmatize atheism and secularism.

The New Atheist Critique

Although the Four Horsemen devote space to other religious systems, these authors acknowledge that their 'focus is on Christianity first' (Dennett 2007, xi): their 'atheism is a Protestant atheism' (Hitchens 2008, 11). Each engages to some extent with more 'traditional' philosophical approaches to the atheist–theist debate, yet as I argue in Cotter (2011), their critique of religion is threefold, focusing upon an apparent tendency to inspire violence, questionable morals, and anti-rationalism.

For these authors, religion is 'violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry' (Hitchens 2008, 56), and centred on a malevolent deity (Dawkins 2007, 51), who inspires his followers to 'lie and even to kill' (Dennett 2007, 338) for a destructive vision that threatens human flourishing (Harris 2006, 227). They build their case via lists of religion-related conflicts and pointing to specific tenets within Christianity and Islam that have historically been utilized as motivation or support for violence. They do not shy away from violence committed by 'atheistic' regimes throughout the twentieth century, but are disposed to attribution bias, in that 'religious' individuals or regimes acting in a positive manner tend to be dismissed as exceptions to the rule or as caused by some 'non-religious' factor(s), while this process is typically reversed in the face of negative behaviour by 'atheist' or 'secular' individuals and regimes (Cotter 2017, 42). The authors' discussion

is augmented with critiques of the absolutizing effects of belief in an afterlife, and the seemingly divisive nature of loyalty to religious in-groups casting human differences 'in terms of eternal rewards and punishments' (Harris 2006, 79–80). Although conceding that religious adherents 'are not psychotic' (Dawkins 2007, 344) and are capable of being 'rational and tolerant of others' (Harris 2006, 28), religion is still 'the most prolific source of the "moral certainties" and "absolutes"' that violence depends on (Dennett 2007, 285). While certain admirable individuals or altruistic side-effects might temporarily redeem religion, these authors believe themselves firmly on the moral high ground.

Turning to morality, McAnulla et al. (2018, 108) have noted six arguments that run throughout the New Atheistic 'critique of religious moral codes':

1. religion interferes with the happiness and well-being that should be the goal of moral life;
2. its useful precepts are self-evident;
3. it discourages autonomous decision-making;
4. it fails to constrain immoral conduct;
5. it magnifies group differences that encourage discrimination against outsiders;
6. its guidelines are excessively vague.

A common theme is that religious teachings are, at best, amoral. Not only do they contain limited guidance on many contemporary moral issues, but they can lead to the conflation of servicing 'one's own spiritual needs' with 'living a morally good life', allowing believers to, at most, 'stay out of trouble' (Dennett 2007, 306). Furthermore, a historical emphasis on morality being derived from religion seems to effectively exempt adherents from moral conversation (Dennett 2007, 295). More damningly, though, religions are constructed as positively immoral, presenting 'a false picture of the world to the innocent', promoting 'eternal reward and/or punishment' for seemingly impossible tasks, and encouraging extreme self-centredness and conceit (Hitchens 2008, 74, 205). Although some might be disposed to forgive biblical morality on account of the New Testament superseding the more morally ambiguous Old Testament, the New Testament's central message of atonement is also singled out as particularly problematic. Finally, the New Atheists argue that most believers utilize their own moral judgement in assessing which religious teachings to accept or reject. They do not argue that religion has never had a role to play in constructing historical moral codes, but that morality is *natural*: 'even monkeys' are moral (Harris 2006, 172). Innate urges

to 'altruism, to generosity, to empathy [and] to pity' are 'blessed, precious mistakes' of evolution (Dawkins 2007, 253) that can be celebrated without religion. One need only look at the direction in which Sam Harris' work has proceeded of late to see that he sincerely believes this.

The final aspects of these authors' critique of religion concerns knowledge, rationality, science, and authority. Religion is perceived as outdated and charged with teaching 'us that it is a virtue to be satisfied with not understanding' (Dawkins 2007, 152), or 'that some other standard of intellectual integrity applies' (Harris 2007, 65). Religious authority figures knowingly 'make up the details as they go along' (Dawkins 2007, 56) and conceal their 'inability to give reasons for their views' (Dennett 2007, 298). This is a selective anti-rationality, with science and reason being employed when they are seen to assist religion in some way (Dawkins 2007, 83). For these authors, 'the mists of incomprehension and failure of communication' form an integral part of religion (Dennett 2007, 217) which makes a virtue of faith, resulting in 'a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible' (Harris 2006, 25). These impediments to rational inquiry are enforced implicitly through 'guilt' (Dennett 2007, 292) and an atmosphere inhibiting potential causes of offence (Harris 2007, 39), as well as through predatory marketing and deliberate interference in the lives of ordinary people, particularly children. These New Atheists thus perceive an authoritarian agenda to limit (the acceptance of) scientific knowledge which might contradict religion or restrict its authority.

The New Atheist Agenda

While it is quite easy to discern what the New Atheists are against, it is somewhat trickier to find coherent threads of what they are for. Many critics even go so far as to suggest that there is nothing constructive or positive being advanced by the movement. For example, when considering whether there is a distinct New Atheist morality, McAnulla et al. (2018) argue that critics tend to rely 'heavily on taking controversial prescriptive claims made by individual theorists as evidence of general trends in new atheist moral theory', focusing on 'one or two claims that seem to be objectionable (such as Harris' defence of torture), without acknowledging that these prescriptive arguments are based on individual preferences and are not part of some kind of "new atheist ethic" that is being developed as an alternative to religion' (McAnulla et al. 2018, 108–9). They continue to demonstrate that there is a considerable diversity in perspective among the Four Horsemen, with

Dawkins' comments reflecting a pragmatic conception of morality, Harris defending a theory of consequentialism that can reduce morality to scientific enquiry, Dennett maintaining that philosophical investigation should play a role in moral valuations, and Hitchens combining common sense, political theory, and insights gleaned from literature. Furthermore, they argue that the New Atheists' aversion to providing prescriptive accounts of morality, but instead 'establishing basic tenets of free enquiry guided by a self-critical attitude, openness to new ideas and respect for free speech' creates space for a 'pluralistic search for alternatives to religious moral codes' (McAnulla et al. 2018, 127). Here we see hints of three further strands of an agenda that can be excavated, surrounding the promotion of science and critical thinking, a reverential and celebratory attitude towards nature, and an ambivalent attitude towards the continued existence of religion.

As I have previously argued, 'the New Atheists are consistently puzzled as to why anyone would choose religious faith over scientific knowledge and critical thinking' (Cotter 2017, 38). In their view, the 'average person [now has] access to insights that not even Darwin or Einstein possessed' (Hitchens 2008, 282) and should be free 'to make their own informed choices' (Dennett 2007, 327–8), including in religious matters. This enthusiasm is exemplified in an explicit promotion of critical thinking – 'a self-reflexive process of evaluating evidence in a systematic and objective manner' (Cotter 2017, 38) – through romantic exhortations. Scientific inquiry is held to have 'emancipatory consequences' (Hitchens 2008, 137), with atheism 'nearly always indicat[ing] a healthy independence of mind and, indeed, a healthy mind' (Dawkins 2007, 26).

It is the atheist's duty to educate the world (Dennett 2007, 328) and promote 'a public discourse that encourages critical thinking and intellectual honesty' (Harris 2007, 87–8). However, despite demonstrable evidence that these authors consider themselves to be critical thinkers, promoting critical thinking and criticizing religion for lacking this virtue, they are not, in fact, critical thinkers. This is because the virtue of open-mindedness is 'a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for critical thinking' and, 'on the basis of their key published works relating to "religion", they cannot be dubbed open-minded, due to (a) a threefold failure of engagement, and (b) through propaganda and rhetoric' (Cotter 2017, 47). That being said, the lack of veracity in their claims to critical thinking does not change the fact that New Atheist discourse explicitly promotes this virtue.

Turning to the reverential and celebratory attitude towards nature, I have already noted the propensity to romantic language in New Atheist texts. The authors write of the 'mystery and marvel' (Hitchens 2008, 8–9), the 'unimaginable surprises' (Harris 2006, 36), and 'the glory of the evolutionary landscape' (Dennett 2007, 268), with Dawkins noting a 'quasi-mystical' response among scientists to the 'magnificence of the real world' (2007, 25, 32). Indeed, one need only look at the titles of Dawkins' *The Greatest Show on Earth* (2009) and *The Magic of Reality* (2011), or his appearance reading excerpts from Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* on Finnish symphonic metal band Nightwish's epic album *Endless Forms Most Beautiful* (2015) for further evidence of this. Such an idealization of nature perhaps bears more resemblance to the nineteenth-century romantic move away from the Enlightenment values that we might associate with New Atheism, which might explain why Dawkins alludes to critics at Cambridge condemning his 'nineteenth-century' worldview – a double-pronged attack aimed at his directness and his reverence for nature's 'monstrosities of improbability' (2007, 185–7). As I have argued elsewhere, 'Romanticism was itself a form of diffuse Christianity, imbued with the same anti-clericalism observed in the Enlightenment and contemporary atheistic writings' and these parallels are suggestive 'of a sentimental attachment to certain aspects of Christianity' sitting alongside 'a liberal, secularising reformist agenda' (Cotter 2011, 92).

This brings me to my final point, concerning an ambivalent attitude towards the continued existence of religion. Perhaps surprisingly, there are few other points on which there is so much disagreement among the New Atheists. At some points they seem to call for the complete eradication of religion, yet at others, things are much more positive. Dawkins speaks of the 'affection' he retains for the Church of England (2007, 32fn.), Hitchens unashamedly acknowledges previous connections to various Christian denominations (2008, 11, 195), and both speak despairingly about the present state of the Church of England (Dawkins 2007, 62; Hitchens 2008, 12, 16). 'A practising Buddhist himself, Harris takes an affirmative stance towards Buddhism, as virtually the antithesis of all other religions' (Zenk 2013, 247). Hitchens suggests that he would be content if the religious simply left him alone (2008, 12–13), but states during the Four Horsemen dialogue that he wouldn't wish 'to see a world without faith' because this would leave him with no one to argue with, while Dennett castigates those believers who withdraw from discussion on the existence of God (2007, 296–7). Harris views 'the very ideal of religious tolerance [as] one of the principle forces driving us toward the abyss' (2006, 15), and any 'toleration extended by contemporary atheists is generally viewed as an interim solution,

before religion eventually dies its natural, or induced, death' (Cotter 2011, 91). However, 'underneath this disagreement flows the thought that the world would fundamentally be a better place if free, rational thought triumphed over supernaturalism' (Cotter 2011, 91).

What's New?

'Critics of new atheism', McAnulla et al. note, 'maintain that it offers nothing more than a repackaging of previous atheist arguments combined with an intolerant, dogmatic and aggressively anti-religious rhetoric' (2018, 54). There is definitely some merit to the charge of repackaging, and Stephen LeDrew (2015; 2016) has done an excellent job of demonstrating that New Atheism is primarily rooted in the 'scientific' stream of a scientific–humanistic split that occurred within atheist discourse in the nineteenth century. According to LeDrew, this scientific atheism is

> grounded in the natural sciences. It considers religion a product of ignorance, a false ancient explanation of nature that is superseded by modern science. In this view religion is strictly a matter of beliefs – in this case, false beliefs – that would fade as scientific knowledge grew. It also involves a Darwinistic conception of progress [. . . with atheism] considered a natural culmination of intellectual progress from superstition to Enlightenment.
>
> (LeDrew 2015, 55)

While this might sound very like the position of the Four Horsemen outlined above, we should also be wary of uncritically constructing a homogeneous old atheism against which New Atheism can be counterposed – this nineteenth-century 'scientific' strand of atheism is but one among dozens that have been traced by historians in the two volumes of this book. Furthermore, reducing New Atheism to *merely* a continuation of this strand would be to ignore some of the arguably unique aspects of this contemporary form (McAnulla et al. 2018, 54–5). I will focus here on three of these aspects: the use of contemporary science, the tone of the discourse, and the New Atheists' politics.

A key feature of New Atheism is a naturalistic worldview, opposing religious claims to revealed truths with a strong emphasis on science and reason as the most appropriate means of understanding reality. Religion is reduced 'to a series of assertions (known as 'God of the Gaps' arguments) in which a supernatural power is postulated as the causal force for those phenomena that science is as yet unable to explain' (McAnulla et al. 2018,

45–6). Some New Atheistic explanations for 'religion', such as Dawkins' somewhat dubious proposal that religions are 'memes' – a proposed unit of cultural transmission analogous to a gene – or that it might be rooted in humanity's evolved capacity to create purposes and goals, make use of evolutionary biology, cognitive science, and other contemporary developments, make this a very twenty-first-century form of atheism.

Another key aspect is the tone of the New Atheistic critique, as discussed by Ethan Quillen. He demonstrates that the 'New Atheists' language tends to be overly critical and yet simultaneously exude an aura of being immune to counter criticism because their position is incapable of being incorrect' (2015, np). Simultaneously, they often construct strawman positions to attack – even if these do correspond to many of their (American) opponents. Furthermore, the New Atheists' militant public image may have outgrown the authors themselves: if they wanted to, would it even be possible to shake this image? In another publication, Quillen engages with a more playful side of New Atheism, and what he calls the 'argument from fictionalization'. Ranging from Bertrand Russell's celestial teapot, Carl Sagan's invisible dragon, and Dawkins' Ultimate Boeing 747 (2007, 113–14), to parody religions such as the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, the Temple of the Invisible Pink Unicorn, and the United Church of Bacon (Quillen 2017, 204–14), Quillen demonstrates that fictional narratives are used to good effect to construct particular religious positions and, in the process, particular (new) atheistic positions (2017, 196). In the United Church of Bacon's '8 Commandments' we see further glimpses of a more constructive (new) atheist agenda: be sceptical, respect boundaries, normalize atheists and religion, have fun, be good, be generous, praise bacon, and advocate for fair church taxation.

The final potentially 'new' aspect of New Atheism at focus here is its politics. Stephen LeDrew has dubbed New Atheism 'a secular fundamentalism' aiming at 'the universalisation of the ideology of scientism and the establishment of its cultural authority' and, in turn, the 'defense of the position of the white middle class male, and of modernity itself' (2016, 2). However, McAnulla et al. 'find relatively little that is utopian within new atheism, instead conceiving it more as a movement seeking to assert rights and challenge religious privilege' (2018, 4–5). While these authors advance a modernist agenda and reassert Enlightenment principles, they do this 'by utilising distinctly postmodern concerns and strategies', particularly the idea that beliefs are no more private than actions (2018, 51). New Atheism also places strong emphasis on atheist identity and consciousness

raising, 'deliberately drawing on the lessons of previous movements (such as the civil rights and the feminist movements), forming a discourse based on minority rights and explicitly atheist symbols' (2018, 52). Common features in New Atheist politics include the aforementioned promotion of an atheist identity politics, as well as 'challenging the public role of religion through promoting secularist arguments' and 'the social customs perceived to protect religious beliefs from scrutiny and questioning both in public and private life' (2018, 154).

Why Now?

As other contributions to these volumes demonstrate, the development of atheism since the sixteenth century has been heavily characterized by positions of resistance to perceived or actual suppression. Religion was frequently constructed as a barrier to progress – social, political, and economic – with atheism linked to radical causes such as the abolition of slavery, issues of family planning, and freedom of expression. However, McAnulla et al. (2018, 41–2) note that a historically more accommodating stance taken by the established Church in the UK helped to dull a potentially more radical edge to atheism, while high levels of pluralism in the United States, combined with a formally secular state, inhibited clear links between religion and the political establishment. Towards the end of the twentieth century, a rise in socialism combined with a period of economic growth and rising living standards also mitigated atheism's radical political drive in Europe. However, high-profile instances of religion-related violence – from the 1979 Iranian revolution to the 9/11 terrorist attacks – combined with the mobilization of the 'Christian Right' in the United States and the global financial crisis of the early twenty-first century have greatly increased the prominence of 'religion' in the discourse of politicians, journalists, activists, scholars, and anti-religionists in recent decades (2018, 43–4). The same decades have witnessed huge technological advances, particularly the ubiquity of the Internet in the west, which have facilitated consciousness raising and community building among the 'non-religious'. Moreover, there 'has also been a shift from modernism to postmodernism' which has 'helped to foster the emergence of new forms of identity politics based around issues such as gender, race, sexuality and the environment' which has provided further opportunity for assertions of 'non-religious' positions and challenged then extant atheistic critiques (2018, 44).

In summary, McAnulla et al. conclude that the popular texts of the 'Four Horsemen' discussed above 'all spoke in part to the political context' of their time:

> Each was motivated by concern at the way religion was impacting upon public life, after periods in which many had assumed that its influence would inevitably fade. [. . . New Atheism is] a reaction, in part, to the apparent failure of societies to continue secularising in the way that many social scientists and others had assumed they would. (2018, 160)

In this way, when placed in its sociohistorical context, this somewhat diffuse intellectual movement is rendered deeply contextual, relevant, and comprehensible.

Gender and Ethnicity

In concluding this chapter, I wish to focus upon two major areas of underrepresentation within the New Atheist movement – a distinct dearth of non-male and non-white voices.

There is ample statistical evidence that on every measure of religiosity women are 'more religious' than men, despite some recent indications that these levels may be reaching parity among younger age cohorts (Trzebiatowska 2019). Given the historical foregrounding of male leaders and actors within most 'religions', which have been founded by men, transmitted by men to men with, perhaps, male-authored central texts (Finger 2017), one might expect atheism to prove particularly attractive for women, and for feminism and atheism to sit comfortably together. However, even among those women who reject religion, 'female atheists constitute a minority within a minority and fewer even actively participate in the organized atheist movement' (Trzebiatowska 2019, 476). Despite explicit overtures supporting theoretical gender equality, atheism in its organized form is frequently perceived as a boys' club rife with explicit and implicit misogyny (Guenther 2019; Trzebiatowska 2019, 477). This is particularly so for New Atheism, despite it being a young, post-feminist movement that claims to support women's rights and oppose sexist practices, and being predominantly based in an American context with an established history of the secular movement embracing women's leadership (Guenther 2019, 49).

Anja Finger (2017) has recently attempted to answer the question 'What gender is New Atheism?' by taking a discursive and sociological approach to what the Four Horsemen have to say about gender, and how the movement

performs gender, via a consideration of a 2012 re-staging of the 'Four Horsemen' dialogue in Melbourne, which saw Ayaan Hirsi Ali take Christopher Hitchens' place. She notes that throughout this dialogue 'Hirsi Ali is addressed as expert on Islam, and her expertise is not merely academic but shaped by her biography' which 'stands in clear contrast with the horsemen's generalist expertise that does not seem to require personal experience' (2017, 159). She concludes that New Atheism's attitude to feminism is problematic, being primarily associated with the performance of heteronormative intellectual masculinity (2017, 168) and the appropriation of gendered accounts of feminine experience to underscore the 'truth' of masculine New Atheist discourse.

Central to New Atheist culture are discourses of science and reason and differentiation of atheists from religious belief and religious believers. Katja Guenther argues that both aspects 'operate to exclude many women and often cause women to feel silenced within the movement' (2019, 50). She continues:

> American culture (and western culture more broadly) maintains a gendered dichotomy between science, reason, rationality, and critical thinking on the one hand and faith, irrationality, emotionality, and superstition on the other wherein science and reason are associated with white men and white masculinity and irrationality and emotionality are associated with women and femininity and with people of color. (2019, 50–1)

New Atheism's emphasis on science and rationality creates pressure for women to adopt gender non-normative characteristics (perceived or real) and 'creates a culture that women . . . often perceive as unwelcoming' (2019, 51). Furthermore, the prevalent dismissive reaction of 'fragile' male atheists to the infamous Elevatorgate scandal of 2011 – where prominent sceptic Rebecca Watson called out a male conference participant's unwanted sexual advances – exemplified a tendency of New Atheist actors 'to use the plight of women in religious societies' in anti-religious rhetoric 'without actually tackling the persistence of gender inequality within the mainstream of secular, western societies like the United States, or even within their own organizations or the broader movement' (2019, 53). Thus, while 'the New Atheist Movement has no formal or institutional barriers to women's participation, the movement fosters a discourse that denies that sexism and misogyny exist outside of religion' and avoids engaging with gender and feminist issues (2019, 54).

Turning to race and ethnicity, it is undeniable that (new) atheism – and non-religion more broadly – is a particularly 'white' preserve. In *Moral*

Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars (2011), Sikivu Hutchinson draws attention to a 2009 Pew Research Center study that showed that 87 per cent of African Americans describe themselves as 'religious' and 79 per cent claim that religion is very important in their lives (the figure was 56 per cent for the broader US population). She argues that organized religion (specifically Christianity) provided a means for African Americans to 'stake a claim to being human and to being American' in a context of slavery and 'sovereign white manhood', while also prescribing 'a rigid hierarchy of masculinity and femininity based on heterosexist norms' (2011, loc. 1467). Christianity established '"insider" status and racial authenticity' and facilitated self-determination (2011, loc. 2912). With this context in mind, many non-white atheists are critical of 'white atheists' often paternalistic and ahistorical criticism of the role of religion in African American, Latino, and Native American cultures (2011, loc. 2912). New Atheism is critiqued in particular for reproducing 'the status quo of white supremacy' by laying blame at the feet of 'religion' instead of 'fighting against white racism, sexism, and classism' (2011, loc. 3105). This experience is heightened further for black LGBTQ people (in the United States at least), who frequently find that becoming atheist means moving into largely white spaces rife with racism and discrimination.

Thus, it appears that despite the utopian vision of much New Atheist rhetoric, the movement still has much to do in order to shed its white, male, intellectualist image. Whether that is actually a priority is another question entirely.

Conclusion

> [D]iscursive acts which are rehearsed, performed, and consumed in public arenas and over many years, can have profound and lasting effects upon societal perceptions, upon what is considered acceptable, legitimate, or common knowledge, and upon who and what becomes marginalized or excluded in society. (Cotter 2017, 47)

The years since the rise of New Atheism have witnessed significant growth in reporting on atheism and secularism across western media and increasing visibility of atheism in popular culture in general – particularly in Europe. At the same time, the term 'atheist' has been somewhat 'tainted' in popular discourse through its association with negative perceptions surrounding the New Atheism, meaning that the great 'consciousness raising' attempted by

Dawkins' 'Out Campaign' has not (yet) produced the desired results. However, the same decades since the rise of New Atheism have seen a reinvigorated humanism in the UK, bolstered by increasing uptake in humanist weddings (legal in Scotland since 2005), as well as the emergence of alternative non-religious movements such as Atheism+ and the Sunday Assembly. Although it is too early to assess the lasting impact of this twenty-first-century movement, it is undeniable that this concentrated burst of atheistic fervour has indelibly inflected wider societal discourses on 'religion' perpetuated by atheists, secularists, religionists, theists, politicians, academics, journalists, and more. It also coincided with a marked rise in individuals across the (western) world choosing not to identify with a 'religion' when prompted in various contexts, and a related academic industry attempting to understand what this might mean. If this relationship has been more causal than coincidental, then I have a lot to thank the New Atheists for, because it means that (for now) I have a job.

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The Internet and the Social Media Revolution

TEEMU TAIRA

The British journalist Andrew Brown once joked that a typical atheist organization consists of three men and the website. Although the joke exaggerates and oversimplifies the situation, it captures something real about atheism in the twenty-first century. Men are more likely to be atheists, and they are also more likely to be members of atheist organizations. Furthermore, such organizations typically have a small number of members, but their presence in the public sphere and significance for individuals tend to be notable. Moreover, the joke underlines the importance of the Internet for the existence and visibility of contemporary atheism. Although one should always be careful in using 'revolution' as a metaphor, it is perhaps not a serious exaggeration when one applies it to the role of the Internet and social media for the increased visibility, interest in, and awareness of atheism in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Scholars have noticed this, and many have written about it, but there are still surprisingly few detailed and comprehensive studies on atheism and the Internet. It is rather that the Internet and social media are only a small part in studies that focus primarily on something else. For this reason, this chapter aims at providing a general overview of the significance of the rise of the Internet and social media for atheism by highlighting selected analytical lenses and offering several examples from different continents.

The use of the Internet had already become quite common in the last decade of the twentieth century, but since then technological developments and lower costs have made it more accessible and practically ubiquitous. The opportunities provided by fast connections that handle moving images effectively and the development of social media platforms (blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and so on) merit scholarly attention. In addition to the technology-driven platforms, it can be argued that the way people use the Internet in their everyday lives – with short attention spans, people browse pages one after another and quickly move to

new ones if they get distracted or bored – is slightly detrimental to the maintenance of serious religious identities. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the Internet and social media themselves explain the upsurge of atheism, new digital communication platforms have inspired and intensified the attraction of atheism and atheist identification.

Atheists were quick to use discussion forums and mailing lists in the 1990s, but social media as we understand it today developed in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Since then, we have witnessed the triumph of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. The term 'social media' was coined with its current meaning around 2005, and the following year *Time Magazine* chose 'you' – the contributor of user-generated media content – as its person of the year. This happened around the time of the publication of 'New Atheist' bestsellers written by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens (published between 2004 and 2007), which raised atheism into the public sphere in Europe and North America in an unprecedented manner. Yet, while social media has amplified the success of atheism, it has not been purely constitutive of it. In some special cases, atheism exists mainly in the virtual world, but the Internet and social media should not be understood as an isolated locus. It is always useful to ask how the presence of atheism on the Internet and in social media is connected to other media and the society in which it appears. This is why it is also relevant to think about both media convergence in the context of atheism and the Internet and the social contextualization of different examples.

The importance of the Internet can be mapped by thinking about the variety of internet sites and their structuring effects. Another area that needs mapping focuses on how the development of the Internet facilitates and structures atheism in the public sphere more generally. Both of these aspects will be highlighted here, but the exploration begins with 'New Atheism' because it is arguably the chief example of the entanglement between atheism and social media, and therefore able to clarify both of the two areas in need of mapping. This part highlights the role of social media in the construction of atheist celebrities, whereas the rest of the chapter focuses on the intertwinement of the Internet and atheism on an everyday level among (more or less) ordinary atheists.

'New Atheism' and the Internet

The Internet helped to spread the message of the 'New Atheists', and for many it was the primary media through which people got to know Dawkins

and others. When I was reading books by 'New Atheists' soon after their publication, I browsed YouTube videos at the same time. There were plenty of recorded debates from the United States and elsewhere in which one of the 'New Atheists' was arguing against someone who defended religion (usually Christianity). There were also talks by critics of the 'New Atheists' and a good number of atheist documentaries, uploaded with or without permission. This created a feeling that something special was happening. This should make it obvious that the possibilities that the Internet offered were taken up by people who were – consciously or not – interested in creating an atmosphere in which atheism became a buzzword for some time and an important part of identity politics (Taira 2012; see also Cimino and Smith 2014). The books were important and, despite the flaws they contained and the scholarly criticism they received, they gave substance and credibility to the 'New Atheists' themselves and atheism in general, something that documentary films and debates uploaded to YouTube and other online media platforms did not provide by themselves.

Traditional websites were also utilized. The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, in particular, was one of the hubs for online atheism. Founded in 2006, it is still running. Today, it offers information about atheism and how atheists are treated in different parts of the world, aiming at facilitating religion-free science education and public policy. In addition to being a portal for sharing information, it allows people to buy books and DVDs, provides the means to donate to the 'good cause', and offers space for atheists to express themselves. The latter is most visible in the 'Convert's Corner', a section of the website featuring a collection of deconversion stories by ordinary people. The steady publication of new posts shows that there is still symbolic value in getting one's story published and heard on the website of one of the celebrity atheists, but the development of specific social media platforms for sharing, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, have probably made the 'Convert's Corner' less significant for finding peer support.

The presence of atheism on Twitter has been dominated by two 'New Atheist' thinkers, Dawkins and Harris, with 2.8 and 1.2 million followers, respectively, in summer 2019. Both swiftly leveraged their roles as public intellectuals on Twitter, whereas Dennett and Hitchens chose the opposite route. Twitter has been a double-edged sword for Dawkins and Harris. On the one hand, their voices have become even more ubiquitous than ever; on the other, both have been strongly criticized for their tweets, often by self-identifying atheists. Largely due to his social media activities, Dawkins has been accused by scientists of misrepresenting science, as well as of

Islamophobia. Both Dawkins and Harris have been seen as representing or supporting white supremacy, the alt-right, and anti-feminism in the age of Trump. The famous atheist blogger and biologist PZ Myers and other online commentators have described how the 'New Atheists' have drifted to the 'dark side' in their online activity. Dawkins' tweet promoting the YouTube video 'Feminists Love Islamists' has caused some atheists to withdraw their support for 'New Atheists', and his comparison on Twitter of 'lovely church bells' against 'aggressive-sounding "Allahu Akhbar"' was reported, debated, and largely criticized in the mainstream media.

It is not only the content that may cause negative effects. In one Reddit thread, an atheist discusses how his admiration for Sam Harris is waning, because Harris is supposed to represent rational self-control and discipline but loses his temper easily, and because his views are no more thoughtful than those of ordinary atheists. Although social media facilitate – and in some cases even constitute – the success of atheist celebrities, they can also strip the aura of the public intellectual.

The phenomenon of 'New Atheism' has made atheism visible in both online and offline publics. If it is assumed that its representatives wanted to change society, it is debatable how much they have achieved, but it is undeniable that many people have become more interested in atheism because of the publicity of the 'New Atheists'. The Internet and social media have played a significant role, and, therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the more everyday and grassroots level of atheism, too.

Becoming an Atheist: Coming Out of the Closet

The early studies on religion and the Internet observed that 'cyberspace' allows us to hear every religious voice and has potential for the creation of new religions (Zaleski 1997; Karaflogka 2003), but they were mostly silent about the Internet's ability to promote atheism. Contrast this to the following example: when the interviewer in the CNN documentary *Atheists: Inside the World of Non-believers* (2015) asked why millennials are giving up on God, David Silverman – then-president of American Atheists – answered, 'Because they read the Internet'. Although Silverman's answer oversimplifies things, it illustrates one important factor. The Internet has secularizing potential. But how? People who have doubts go online, sometimes secretively, and if they find supporting information for their doubts and peer support from discussion forums and other social media platforms, they may leave their religious identification behind. This has proven to be a significant pattern among

doubting members of closed and conservative communities, even in societies where atheism is not a thoroughly exceptional identification (Taira 2019). When others testify how they became atheists, general interest in atheist celebrities and their social media presence are said to play a critical role (Kontala 2016, 108), although there are usually other reasons, too. Even those who are merely searching for information about religions may incidentally find themselves reading sites that provide information that turns out to be detrimental to their religious identity. Sometimes this is not accidental. For instance, while anti-Mormon websites tend to rank high in search engine recommendations, their online addresses may not necessarily reveal their true nature (Avance 2013).

A study of female atheist vloggers (video bloggers) in the United States demonstrates how people post videos that detail their personal lives as atheists and address more common worries about what it is like to live as an atheist in a society where having a religious identity is still the norm. The videos reveal an uncertainty of feelings but also the inner need to come out as atheist. Sharing their narratives is helpful in lifting weight from their hearts. They are sometimes afraid of how their family will react, and at least their family's reaction is relevant to them. Not all of these vloggers despise religion and religious people, but a good number see religious people as hypocrites and religion as a system of 'primitive science' that controls people by fear, whereas atheists are decent and moral people who do not need God in order to be good (Lundmark 2019). This demonstrates the importance of social media for the process of coming out as an atheist, as well as for those who watch and comment on the videos.

The general power of the Internet has also been noted by those who promote atheism. Thus, formal structures and services have been established. The Clergy Project (TCP) is one of the famous ones in the US context. Founded in 2011 after Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola conducted a pilot study of preachers who are not believers, its aim is to provide space and support for religious professionals who have doubts or who no longer believe in God but are afraid to speak about it publicly. Many pastors and ministers involved say that time spent on the Internet has been a factor in their emergent atheism (Zuckerman 2014, 71), and TCP attempts to support emerging atheist identities more formally. The project claims to have participants from a wide range of religious traditions, so its agenda is by no means limited to Christianity, but the 'Our Stories' section on the website contains only Christian segments. In any case, TCP is a good example of how online involvement functions as a supportive environment that may open doors and

in some cases speed up the process of becoming an atheist and stating it publicly.

Despite the revolutionary potential of the Internet, studies concerning religious conversion are relatively unanimous about the fact that the web is rarely enough for people to change their convictions. The same is true for people who undergo religious deconversion and become apostates (Dawson 2003; Whitaker 2014; Taira 2019). One almost always needs more than online information and peer support. Typically, one depends on backing and reassurance from family, relatives, or friends, yet sometimes previously unknown people met at events are enough to validate one's decision. The Internet is rarely the sole reason for people becoming atheists and proclaiming it in public, but it has a significant facilitating role. In a collection of more than two-dozen narratives by American atheists, only a few mention the Internet and social media, but one story is a particularly good example of the role of the Internet and social media: 'Lynette', a twenty-one-year-old woman from Chicago, tells us that it was important that her older brother came out first. When he informed about it in his Facebook status, Lynette followed the comments and her brother's reaction to them. She realized that there is a stigma around being an atheist in America, but felt that there is a difference between those with critical attitudes and actual atheists. She started to read atheist blogs and became convinced that atheists are good and thoughtful people. Although she admits that she is an atheist, she has come only halfway out of the closet; she announced it on her Facebook profile but otherwise has only told her closest friends and siblings, being afraid still of what others, particularly people from her church, might say (Brewster 2014, 38–9). Lynette's narrative demonstrates how the Internet and social media create new ways of coming out, how they help people to find information and support, and how offline relations are still important. Perhaps the real revolutionary impact of the Internet and social media in terms of becoming an atheist is their ability to reassure individuals that they are not alone in their doubts.

Such potential is even more important in countries where the attitude towards atheism is very hostile, and it is not always easy to know whether there is a term for one's views. In such contexts, the Internet has proved to be a game-changer for many. For example, Candice Breitz's seven-channel art installation *Love Story* (2016) consists of interviews with refugees, including twenty-seven-year-old Farah Abdi Mohamed (an assumed name), a Somali who in a three-and-a-half-hour interview explains how he became an atheist and a refugee. He escaped Somalia in 2012 because he feared being killed as an

atheist in an Islamic country. He arrived first in Cairo, Egypt and stayed there for almost three years. Then he fled to Europe, and from Italy to Berlin, Germany after he realized that it is not so easy to be an atheist in Egypt either. He tells that, at first, he did not consider himself religious and had doubts. He was afraid that the community would isolate him if he did not believe, so rather than talking to other people, he started to look up information on the Internet. Soon he found many people who had doubts and he became very happy that he was not alone. He also found the terms 'atheism' and 'atheist' from the Internet. In Somalia, he was afraid to type such words into the search engine and he always emptied the browser cache after doing so. This testimony is an example of a general pattern, in which becoming an atheist can be a slow and rocky process, with the Internet playing an important facilitating rather than constitutive role. Particularly in areas where atheism is not tolerated or discussed, access to information through the Internet is especially crucial.

Sustaining Atheism: Empowerment and Plausibility Structures

The Internet itself might be seen as a medium that advances secularization, because of the way in which it is structured and the way it is used. Phil Zuckerman (2014, 72) has suggested that the easy availability of entertainment, mental stimulation, searching, looking and clicking, time-wasting, and constant networking and communication may be undermining religion's ability to hold our interest. There is a grain of truth in this statement, but it can be argued that the same distractive dimension might apply also to difficulties in forming and maintaining atheist identities and communities, leaving people without stable identifiers. The existing scholarship has paid attention to the question of whether the Internet offers any support for sustaining atheism, and the general answer is actually positive: the Internet offers possibilities for empowerment of atheistic identities, as well as 'plausibility structures' (Berger 1967) for them, through communication and interaction in virtual communities.

According to an old stereotype, in a religious village there was always one atheist. He was a grumpy man who was disliked by everyone else who lived there. The stereotype demonstrates the idea that atheists are alone, surrounded by people who have different ideas, and isolated from others who share a common view. The Internet, however, 'allows people who may be privately harbouring doubts about their religion to immediately connect with others who

also share such doubts' (Zuckerman 2014, 71). This means that the Internet and social media networks provide structures that facilitate the maintenance of atheism. It offers continuous peer support even when face-to-face contact is rare.

The Internet has been dubbed as the atheist agora. One of the most popular atheist bloggers, Hemant Mehta, has been particularly vocal about the promise of the Internet for atheism. In 2009 he wrote a blog post with the title 'Would you be an atheist without the Internet?', and he has called the Internet a 'religion destroyer' because of its ability to both offer information that is detrimental to religion and reorganize atheism into a social and political force. At least among blogging atheists, there is a strong belief that their work and chosen medium matter.

For anyone who wants to explore atheist blogs and websites further, a good starting point is the list 'Top 35 atheist blogs and websites every atheist must follow in 2021' (https://blog.feedspot.com/atheist_blogs). Their profiles vary from general atheist causes to science, from feminism to race issues, from parenting to specific religious traditions. What cannot be found on the list are the blogs and websites focusing on non-Christian traditions. The previously mentioned Hemant Mehta was at the top with his blog Friendly Atheist, ahead of Reddit's atheism thread, which has attracted scholarly attention.

A study of atheism on Reddit – the US news aggregation and discussion forum – suggests that the experience of community and belonging can be as important as other, more instrumental, goals (Lundmark and LeDrew 2019). This is an apt example of a combination of aspects: although it primarily demonstrates the maintenance of atheism through belonging and the relevance of the community of like-minded people, a debate element characterizes the Reddit platform itself. The activities may well take place in silos where similar types of people interact, but the service is designed to enable discussion and debate.

The previously mentioned female atheist YouTube vloggers offer another example of the Internet providing an atheist community. But it is not a closed community. It forms a kind of counter-public – at least an imagined one – to mainstream discussion, and it crosses traditional boundaries between private and public. In such a space, people are able to find other atheists who help them to understand that they are not alone with their thoughts and that there is nothing wrong with them. An interesting addition is that the female atheist vloggers not only defend and reflect on themselves in relation to predominantly religious society, but they also feel compelled to define themselves against male-dominated atheist micropublics (Lundmark 2019).

There are also forms of social media that combine virtual interaction and face-to-face encounters. An online dating site tailored specifically for atheists, Atheist Passions, has remained a minor curiosity, and some atheists have criticized the service or made fun of it in online discussions. Many atheist groups have been formed at meetup.com, which enables and encourages people to arrange offline meetings (Zuckerman et al. 2016, 220). However, for some atheists the relevance of the Internet lies in its ability to offer space for imagining the atheist community in a way that still allows anonymity and participatory flexibility. In their study of the online activity of American atheists, Cimino and Smith (2014) found that internet activities often supplement offline involvement, but approximately 40 per cent reported that their involvement was online only. Online involvement empowers atheists in their everyday life and helps in maintaining atheist identification. While people may disagree with atheist influencers and celebrities, they are nonetheless significant in providing a set of issues around which the commonality of imagined community and online structures are built. Cimino and Smith argue correctly that online sites such as Reddit 'have opened up an active space for atheists to construct and share mutual concerns about their situation at a time when American public life is still functioning under a norm of religiosity in many contexts' (Cimino and Smith 2014, 86). Furthermore, if there is such a thing as atheist mobilization, it happens primarily on the Internet and social media platforms – as opposed to, say, the mobilization of American evangelicals, which takes place mainly through friends and neighbours in a local community.

The empowering dimension of the Internet for atheists is something that practically everyone agrees on. The disagreements arise when questions are asked about the viability and sustenance of atheist identifications and their wider societal influence. Jack Laughlin (2016), for instance, suggests that there are significant limits to Internet-mediated atheism. The Internet offers some semblance of the communal for atheists, but web-based atheism is more an example of a temporary discourse than a movement, community, or institution, as it lives from the attention it gets. When the attention decreases or is not continually renewed, the community practically ceases to exist. Although it is too early to definitively say what the long-term offline impact will be, the ephemeral nature of many atheist online communities should be further theorized, as it may add a significant qualification to the Internet and social media 'revolution'. In any case, there are examples that offer material for thinking about how online activities are connected to the offline environment.

Online and Offline Interaction

The Internet and social media can function in favour of atheists by facilitating 'outing' and offering support and a point of identification (no matter how imaginary and whether it extends to face-to-face encounters). They are also means for sharing information about atheism and for protecting atheists' rights and status in society. In cases in which mainstream media does not cover their views, online facilities may be extremely helpful. For instance, when Pope Benedict XVI visited Britain in 2010, the majority of the media coverage was very positive despite the fact that a significant minority protested in the streets against the visit. Newspapers wrote about the protests, but the space given to them was limited and there were no images of the protests on the front page. However, those who wanted to know more were able to visit the websites of various secular organizations and find plenty of pictures of the protests, as well as commentary (Knott et al. 2013). This is simply one – almost trivial – case exemplifying why the Internet also matters for atheists in a wider social context, enabling them to share information about actual events given limited space in the mainstream media.

In many instances, the roles of events and the Internet have changed. It is often the case that events are organized in order to boost online visibility; furthermore, offline events are becoming increasingly irrelevant if the attention can be achieved by other means. Organizations may have different profiles, and therefore the type of attention or impact needed requires thought in relation to the appropriate tactics. Before focusing on other areas, I shall examine examples from twenty-first-century Finland – a country where being an atheist has no social stigma, but where a large majority belongs to the Lutheran Church and supports its close relations with the state – in order to highlight different online tactics of atheist and non-religious organizations to achieve public impact.

The atheist bus campaign that originated from Britain in early 2009 arrived half a year later in Finland. Almost no one saw the buses, which advertised atheism and suggested that there is probably no God, but the mainstream media wrote about the case and online discussion was lively. The main organizing association, the Union of Freethinkers of Finland, gained more members and got visibility, but this was basically the only concrete impact of the event. The following year, the same association launched a campaign in which people were able to swap their Bibles for porn magazines. This campaign, copied from the United States, took place in a market square in Helsinki. Again, participation in the event was not as important as the media

visibility, stimulated by online activities. The coverage was mostly negative, however, and some members allegedly dropped their membership because of this provocation. People – both religious and non-religious – reacted strongly against the campaign in their online feedback. With the Internet, the reach of relatively minor events may be considerably greater than with traditional mass media. That is what provocations look for, although they can be risky, as in this example.

The most effective online innovations by atheists in Finland are two sites: Kantelupukki ('Tattler') and Eroa kirkosta ('Resign from the church'). A service founded jointly by several non-religious associations, Kantelupukki operates on Facebook and as a separate website. It collects information about cases in which the rights of atheists (children or parents) may have been breached in schools or kindergarten. It makes these cases public, informs schools and kindergartens on how they should deal with religious content and events so that they are in accordance with the law on religious freedom, and advises parents on what to do if things do not change. On their website they have an archive of decisions on cases that have officially been dealt with on the basis of Kantelupukki's suggestions. Because of this service, parents are more willing overall to react if they suspect that schools and kindergartens are not adhering to the regulations, and educational institutions know that their possible religious content is being monitored more carefully and nationally. Officials have to deal with cases more than before and, consequently, the interpretation of the rules may become clearer. The general public may also become more aware of the rules and practices. The service is not strongly associated with its background organizations, which means that even non-religious people who care for their own and their children's rights but do not relate to associations that are critical of religion can find the service valuable, support it, and even encourage others to use it if needed.

Another success story from the point of view of atheists is the website where one can fill out a form to leave the Lutheran Church or any registered religious community. This is now easier than before, because the web service takes care of the paperwork. As a result, the Church is losing its taxpaying members. The project was launched in 2003, and during the first fourteen years approximately 600,000 Finns had used it. This is a significant number in a country with 5.5 million inhabitants. Nowadays, more than 90 per cent of all formal apostasies are done through this service. Practically speaking, the only additional thing that the service does is to write press releases that contain information about the formal apostasy peaks and the reasons people have stated for their decision. Those running the service are mostly active atheists who may be very critical of

religion in public when speaking as individuals or on behalf of other organizations, but as representatives of this particular service they always highlight the equal treatment of all convictions. At first the service faced a lot of criticism and various bodies tried to prevent its activity, without success, but gradually it has become a normal part of Finnish society. This is a unique example of atheists successfully using an online technology with verifiably concrete consequences outside the Internet.

In some cases, the impact on social structures is practically non-existent and the focus is solely on consciousness raising and the maintenance of the online community. One example is the Dutch Atheist Facebook page, with more than 130,000 followers. The page frequently shares links to news stories, social media, and memes that promote atheism and ridicule religion. Its working language is English, not Dutch, and it does not have a strong national profile, as the shared stories deal with Europe, North America, and the Middle East, among other regions.

Particularly in areas where public self-identification as an atheist is forbidden or strongly discouraged, social media and its disrespect for national and regional boundaries have proven efficient beyond individual 'outings'. In Egypt, for instance, a guest speaker was once kicked off a television programme for explaining what the terms 'atheism' and 'agnosticism' mean, while also indicating his support for them. This indicates how the media can be hostile towards such positions, but individuals use the Internet when they want to know about atheism. They prefer smartphones, because in Internet cafes their activities may be visible to others. They can find influencers, such as Masry Mulhid ('the Egyptian Atheist'), who operates from the United States but is widely followed in Egypt. His followers, who call him Father Masry Mulhid, listen to his views on Islam and even his recommendations on who to vote for. Thanks to media technology, he has become an atheist influencer in a way that would not have been possible a couple of decades ago in a country where atheist youths are still persecuted (van Nieuwkerk 2018).

Using social media is rarely a one-way affair. It is not only about helping atheists to get more followers, strengthening their group identity, and spreading information to others who might be interested in their views. In some countries, typically Muslim-majority ones, identifying and operating as an atheist in social media (or elsewhere) and criticizing the majority's views can be dangerous. A relatively well-known example is the case of Alexander Aan, an Indonesian atheist and ex-Muslim, who was imprisoned in 2012 after posting content on Facebook that was considered dissemination of information aimed at inciting

religious hatred or hostility, and calling others to embrace atheism. Aan posted messages to an atheist Facebook group, suggesting that God does not exist and hinting that Muhammad had been attracted to his daughter-in-law. This was enough for people to attack him on his way to work, and he was soon taken into protective custody. After this he was charged, found guilty, and sentenced to two-and-a-half years' imprisonment. This is not an isolated case; similar examples are to be found from Egypt, Kuwait, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the UAE, among others. It is actually typical that arrests for defaming religion in the Middle East happen as a result of Internet activity (Whitaker 2014). Although there are good reasons to oppose this practice, it is also important to understand that in several Muslim-majority countries, identifying as an atheist is often understood as a betrayal of one's family and culture rather than a private matter of conscience.

In more liberal societies the risks are less severe, but the online environment simply does not support atheism in all respects. Many atheistic websites maintain and repeat the abridging 'New Atheist' version of religion's role in history, either because it supports their worldview or because they think that it is the correct version. Borden W. Painter, Jr – who has studied how Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens (mis)construct history for their purposes – reminds that the Internet 'swarms with websites of bad history but also gives us quick access to sound opinions and information from mainstream historians' (Painter, Jr 2014, 168). If the Internet can be used to debunk false claims made by religious people, it can just as easily serve to reveal mistaken or simplifying statements made by atheists. The real question, then, is how people use the opportunities and what type of information users are drawn to. In this sense, the outcome of such technological development is not fixed regarding atheism, but so far the Internet and social media have been more helpful for atheists than for traditional religious communities and their authority structures. Digitalization undermines traditional religious authority, but it also creates space for new and emergent authority structures, and this applies to atheism and religion alike. Atheist discourse online is formed and dominated by those who have access to the means to manage their own attending public, and the struggle over authoritative voices and views applies to the in-group itself. Therefore, one of the outcomes of the online presence of atheists has been the vitality of debate among atheists.

Debating the Forms of Atheism

Thanks to the Internet and social media, there has been an explosion of atheist expressions by the masses. Contemporary material about atheism, including its local varieties and nuances, is much more easily accessible than ever before. Atheism can be said to be on the receiving end in the age of the Internet and social media, but technological developments have had some repercussions for in-group communication, too. One of the outcomes is that it is easier to explore the internal variety among atheists. If popular histories of atheism have been written as a chronological succession of ideas by atheist intellectuals – including some regional variety – the Internet and social media will most likely figure in future presentations, showing the nuances and disagreements between atheists and incorporating more views from ordinary, less famous people.

By following debates on atheism on the Internet and in social media, some significant differences are easy to detect. Many atheists highlight the importance of an aggressive critique of religion, whereas others prefer the more moderate stance of the 'live and let live' approach. As shown in this chapter, sometimes it is also a question of division of labour within atheist organizations, with some platforms focusing on the former and some on the latter. One of the most heated debates has been between 'dictionary atheists' (a term popularized by the previously mentioned atheist blogger PZ Myers) and those who see atheism as going hand in hand with social responsibility and respect for diversity (see Laughlin 2016). The former refers to the position that characterizes atheism as nothing else but disbelief in the existence of God, whereas the latter sees atheism joined with those who fight against inequalities of gender, race, class, and sexuality. The former is more likely to align itself with 'New Atheist' critiques of all types and modes of religion, whereas the latter is more likely to seek alliance with moderate and liberal believers in their opposition to all forms of repression. Although the boundaries of these categories are blurred in practice, these dichotomies are utilized in contemporary online debates about the ideal form and nature of atheism.

Differences and disagreements are often followed by organizations splitting and the founding of new ones. One example is the 'atheist church' Sunday Assembly (founded in 2013), which after operating in Britain for a year was considered not atheist enough and too accommodating in its approach. Then, the Godless Revival was founded in the United States. Its spokesperson, Lee Moore, accused the Sunday Assembly of being too church-like and having a problem with atheism. This internal disagreement, which

was partly played out in social media, was just the first lesson to be learned from the Godless Revival. The second lesson would come after some time, when it became clear that the Godless Revival had dried up. Its Facebook page stated in 2018: 'This is a dead page for a dead project. Screw organized atheism.' The Sunday Assembly, however, continues in a reduced form. One of its founders has moved on and the community figures less in social media than before. Many atheist organizations require continuous online attention to maintain their vitality, and some of the energy comes not only from critiquing religion but from the internal debates among the atheists.

Conclusion

The Urban Dictionary gives a tongue-in-cheek description of 'internet atheists': they lack a sense of humour if jokes are made about them, but they find nothing wrong in being offensive when making jokes about religious people. Internet atheists are thus said to use 'search and refute' tactics when targeting religious people; they claim not to discriminate, but they are far more polite if you are an atheist.

A large part of this description paints a picture of the 'internet atheist' as someone who is a bit grumpy and aggressive and who applies different criteria of interaction and politeness to their in-group and out-group. Yet, however jokingly this is said, it depicts something about the impression that people have of atheists online. Furthermore, the fact that the dictionary has a separate term for 'internet atheist', carefully distinguished from an atheist who merely uses the Internet, testifies that the presence of atheists online is strong and it also contains ambiguities, which this chapter has demonstrated.

It is obvious that the Internet and social media have been and still are extremely important and useful for atheism, and it is only a slight exaggeration to call their role revolutionary. These technologies have made it possible for atheism to become a widely discussed topic in society at large, although it should be kept in mind that 'New Atheist' bestsellers were published when most of the currently influential social media sites were still in their infancy or non-existent. More importantly, they have facilitated people in becoming atheists and offered many kinds of structured virtual spaces for the construction, sustenance, and maintenance of atheistic identification. They have provided platforms for information about atheism beyond national boundaries and opportunities to protect the rights of atheists, albeit not without risks and backlash. Furthermore, they have revealed the diversity of atheistic expressions, often leading to heated arguments

about its most appropriate type and form. These are remarkable developments regarding the relevance of the Internet and social media for atheism, including the relations between online and offline environments, and as such they merit further study.

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56

The Atheist Spring? Emerging Non-belief in the Islamic World

KARIN VAN NIEUWKERK

One of the most interesting features of the twenty-first century is the emergence of atheist discourses within Muslim-majority countries. Largely enabled by the Internet (see Chapter 55), atheist ideas appear to be acquiring an unprecedented audience in regions where such things are not merely *outré*, but actively illegal and even dangerous, as attested by several well-publicized instances of bloggers being imprisoned or even executed on conviction of apostasy.

The Saudi activist and founder of the website Free Saudi Liberals, Raif Badawi, is a prominent case in point. Despite never renouncing religion, he was arrested in 2012 and charged with apostasy. He was found guilty of 'producing what would disturb public order, religious values and morals', facilitating 'sin, aggression and insulting Muslims' sanctities', and 'ridiculing Islamic religious figures' (Manea 2016, 120). Badawi was sentenced to ten years in prison, public flogging, and a fine. The first fifty lashes were administered; however, due to a combination of international pressure and his poor health, the remaining 950 have been postponed, the prospect of which he awaits in prison.[1] In Sudan, twenty-five Muslims have been threatened with the death penalty on charges of apostasy. The accused belong to the Hausa minority, many of whom follow a different interpretation of Islam to the one sanctioned by Omar al-Bashir's regime.[2]

In other Middle Eastern countries, where apostasy is not illegal, the blasphemy laws are used to silence non-believers, atheists, and sceptics. Although in these countries, such as Egypt, officially there is 'freedom of belief', there is no 'freedom of expressing non-belief'. 'Insulting religion' or

1 www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/18/raif-badawi-saudi-arabia-blogger (accessed 11 June 2019).

2 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/16/sudan-charges-25-death-penalty-apostasy-sharia-law (Accessed 11 June 2019).

inciting others to leave religion is punishable by a fine or imprisonment. Yet, also in Egypt, an attempt has recently been made to directly criminalize any statement indicating a person's non-belief, even without insulting or inciting others. A ban on atheism has not yet been implemented, but it is a clear indication of the extremely sensitive nature of atheism in Egypt, as elsewhere in the Middle East.

These examples demonstrate the ambiguity of what exactly apostasy is and how it is difficult to distinguish from heresy or blasphemy. This lack of clarity opens up space for the political use of accusations of apostasy and blasphemy to sentence political opponents or silence deviant opinions. Atheism, or *ilhad* in Arabic, literally means 'heretic' or 'deviance'. The expression of atheism is interpreted as a rebellious act against the public order and explains why accusations of apostasy and blasphemy are used by both the state and ordinary citizens to punish supposedly deviant behaviour or opposition.

Despite the obvious risk involved in speaking out as a non-believer, the number of non-believers appears to be on the rise. At least they are more visible and audible in the form of written testimonials (Ibn Warraq 1995; 2003; Hirsi Ali 2007; Sultan 2009) and particularly active on social media. According to research by the Arab Barometer, the number of people in the Middle East identifying as 'not religious' has risen from 8 per cent in 2011 to 11.6 per cent in 2018 for the selected countries in Figure 56.1. According to this source, the rise is greatest in the under-thirty age category, among whom 15.5 per cent identify as not religious.[3]

This new visibility of non-believing is tied to particular political, religious, and sociocultural contexts. This chapter will principally focus on the emergence of non-believing in one influential country in the Middle East: Egypt.

In Egypt, the 'Atheist Spring' appears to be largely linked to the 2011 revolution and its aftermath – that is, first the one-year rule of the Muslim Brotherhood (2012–13) followed by the 'restoration period' under President al-Sisi (2014–). Initially, non-believers were expected to be left in peace as the new regime of al-Sisi was fully occupied with combating the Muslim

3 Data taken from the Arab Barometer, which provides tools for analysis of the data set collected in five waves between 2008 and 2018. People were asked to identify as religious, somewhat religious, non-religious, or 'don't know': www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/data-analysis-tool (accessed 7 October 2019). See also www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48703377 (accessed 17 June 2019) for a comparison of the 2013 and 2018 waves. Libya, Kuwait, and Morocco are included in the BBC analysis, which slightly increases the percentage of non-religious people to 12.8 per cent. Since these countries were not included in the second wave (2011) I have left them out.

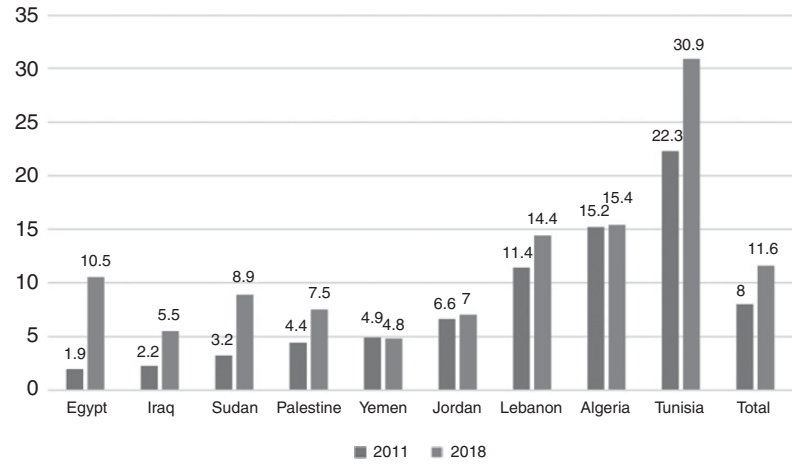

Figure 56.1 Percentage of non-religiosity.

Brotherhood and other forms of religious 'extremism', allowing scope for anti-Islam voices. However, it soon became clear that any form of deviance, including religious deviance both in the form of Islamic radicalism and non-believing, would be repressed by the state.

Can we really speak about an 'Atheist Spring'? How far is it related to the 'Arab Spring'? Has the number of 'nones' and atheists really increased in Egypt or do they speak out more often? Who are these non-believers? And, last but not least, why is there such fear of atheism by the authorities and society at large?

In general, there are three important taboo zones in the Middle East: politics, religion, and sexuality. Political, religious, and patriarchal control of citizens is the Egyptian state's solid core of stability. As we will see, non-belief is perceived not only as an attack on the political and religious authorities, but also on the patriarchal and moral order. Fieldwork among young non-believers demonstrates that – indeed – they call all three taboo zones into question. This makes atheism such a critical issue and explains the high political, religious, and moral issues at stake for the authorities concerned.

Rise of Non-believing in Egypt

Atheism or scepticism – or accusations of such – is not a recent phenomenon in the Muslim world. In his book *Freedom of Religious Belief* (2005), al-Khatib provides a brief historical overview of prominent cases in the modern Middle

East in which the freedom to change or leave religion was hotly debated. The discussion on freedom of conscience was fanned starting with As'ad Shidyaq (1798–1830) – a Levantian Catholic Maronite who converted to Protestantism and was killed during his imprisonment. In the late nineteenth century, scholars such as the Egyptian professor Shibli Shumayyil, who supported the new theory of evolution, also sparked accusations of heresy and atheism. The modernist renewal movement of, among others, Taha Hussein and Muhammad Hussein Heikal, resulted in prominent cases of accusations of apostasy against such Enlightenment writers and thinkers. Isma'il Mazhar founded *al-Usur* in 1927, a journal that disseminated and championed liberal and secularist ideas, and openly posed the issue of atheism for the first time in the Arab world (al-Khatib 2005, 17).

In 1930, Isma'il Adham wrote a famous essay entitled 'Why I am an atheist'. After reading Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* he became a 'believer in evolution, science and logic' (al-Khatib 2005, 267–8). Whereas Darwinism and natural science played a central role in Arabic debates in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the 'scientific atheism' of Marxism and communism was much more prominent and influential in the second half of the twentieth century (Schielke 2013, 312). However, communists and socialists in most Muslim countries rarely promoted atheism in public. They usually argued that Islam, when properly implemented, aligns perfectly with socialism (Schielke 2013, 644). Many intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s had a secular attitude with open or hidden stances of non-believing (Whitaker 2014).

The Islamic Revival has been a noticeable phenomenon in Egypt and elsewhere in the Muslim world since the late 1970s. The number of blasphemy cases increased during this period, initiated both by conservative Islamists within the religious establishment and non-state actors, such as journalists, independent religious figures, academics, and members of parliament, who sought to attack secular intellectuals and artists. Farag Fuda, a secular intellectual, was murdered in 1992 after the Egyptian religious authorities decided that 'everything he does is against Islam' (Mostyn 2002, 148). However, the Egyptian state eventually came to the conclusion that it was Farag Fuda's murderer, an Islamic radical, who was the heretic and not the victim (Larsson 2018, 214). In 1994, the Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz was stabbed by two militant Islamists. In 1993, the prominent scholar Nasr Abu Zayd was declared a 'heretic' and forced into exile in 1996 in the face of accusations of apostasy.

Previously the media paid scant attention to apostasy and non-believing, as it appeared to be the exclusive concern of incidental intellectuals or artists. However, since 2005 it became much larger in scope and a wider concern for society in general. Young people increasingly engaged in debates on belief, secularism, and atheism, via blogs, discussion forums, and Paltalk.

Karim ʿAmer was the first blogger to be arrested in Egypt in 2005. He penned a highly critical blog about Islam, particularly about the riots and attacks on Copts in the name of religion – an action he was arrested for in 2006, receiving a four-year jail sentence. Alber Saber was handed down a three-year term in 2012. On 26 January 2013 he was released on appeal and fled Egypt. These cases inspired other young atheists to launch YouTube channels to disseminate public information about non-believing and secularism.

Obviously the Internet provides many different ideas and voices, including those of vocal New Atheists such as Dawkins. Particularly his book *The God Delusion*, as well as videos by New Atheists translated into Arabic, offer a source of information and inspiration about atheism. The evolving Arab and Egyptian non-believers' social media has become increasingly significant for young non-believers, not only as a source of information but also as an eye-opening experience that there are indeed 'others out there' who share their own personal doubts about God and religion.

Around the period of the revolution, many YouTube channels and Facebook pages were set up and magazines were published discussing non-believing and atheism. These included *Arab Atheist Magazine*, Arab Atheist Broadcasting, the Declare your Atheism Facebook page, along with channels by individual non-believers, such as The Egyptian Atheist and the Black Ducks Show.

This proliferation on social media of non-believing triggered a shrill debate across the state media and among religious officials about the alarming and threatening phenomenon. Speculation about the numbers of atheists abounded. Religious sources such as the principal authority of Islam, the Azhar, reported that Egypt was home to exactly 866 atheists out of a population of 87 million. However, former Grand Mufti, ʿAli Goma', indicated that a study was conducted by the Azhar among 6000 young people and that 12.5 per cent of them turned out to be atheists. He managed to have 10 per cent of them revert back to Islam. Sheikh Turki, responsible for the Azhar campaign to fight atheism, pegs the figure at a few thousand, yet he feared non-belief would be contagious, thus explaining the need for a campaign. However, another sheikh in a media programme estimated atheists to number 3.7 million, precipitated by the people's anger at the

Muslim Brotherhood's time in office. In many TV shows of religious and state media the rise of atheism is hyped up. Al-Karama TV, for instance, claimed that atheism was a new wave of 'millions'.[4] These programmes often forge a link with the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. Some atheists also contend that 'in almost every house there is a nonbeliever'.[5]

It is clear that the statistics are part of political contestations. The numbers are difficult to estimate as it is quite risky for most people to 'come out of the closet'. As a young non-believer told me: 'Most Egyptians lead secret lives – whether sexually or religiously. I have no doubt that there are far more atheists than would be publicly counted. And those very atheists would express adamant religious belief in public even though they might be secretly atheists. This is not an environment that would allow expression in any way.' The latest and possibly most reliable figure is from the Arab Barometer, according to which around 10.5 per cent – particularly young people between fifteen and twenty-nine (18.4 per cent) – identified as non-religious in 2018.[6] Whereas it is difficult to state with certainty that the number is on the rise, it does appear that people increasingly come out of the closet.

So, who are these outspoken or closet atheists? Why do they abandon Islam and why do some choose to speak out despite the obvious dangers involved?

Who Are the Non-believers?

It is difficult to provide a clear profile of an Egyptian non-believer, given that most remain anonymous. Atheism is present in Muslim as well as Coptic Christian communities, among both men and women. I conducted several periods of fieldwork between 2013 and 2018 and interviewed thirty-seven non-believers, ranging from agnostics to outspoken atheists, consisting of twenty-two males and fifteen females of which twenty-six were former Muslims and eleven former Copts. I also investigated the state media on atheism and the social media generated by activist atheists. Based on these sources I would say that non-believers are mostly the young and well educated. Most choose to remain hidden, but some are (openly) activists on social media and moderate YouTube channels.

4 www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WF7HXsB2kk (accessed 10 June 2015).
5 www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfPEXqiXfMg (accessed 10 June 2015).
6 www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/data-analysis-tool (accessed 7 October 2019). Other interesting information that can be extracted from the data set for 2018 (n = 2399) is the percentage of non-religious persons according to gender: 14 per cent are male and 6.7 per cent are female; and according to employment status: 15.5 per cent are students and 23.1 per cent are unemployed or looking for work.

The Black Ducks, which chimes with black sheep in English, is moderated by Ismaʿil Muhammad. He was influenced by one of the first cases of a young person being arrested for non-belief, in this case the former Coptic Alber Saber. This made him reflect on Islam and human rights, prompting him eventually to abandon the religion and to become an activist for free speech. The chief aim of the Black Ducks is to provide a platform for expressing the opinions of Arab non-believers, freethinkers, atheists, agnostics, or anyone holding a worldview that proves unacceptable to mainstream media. Black Ducks' host, Ismaʿil Muhammad, started the channel in August 2013 and has uploaded 312 episodes at the time of writing.[7]

As with Ismaʿil Muhammad, Ahmad Harqan works from Egypt.[8] They produced several episodes together, but Ahmad Harqan has also set up his own channel. Ahmad Harqan is a former Salafi who was destined to become a preacher. He studied in Saudi Arabia and is well versed in the Quran and *hadith*, the traditions and sayings of the Prophet. Confronted with several 'inconsistencies' in the verses of the Quran, he concluded it could not be divine in source or nature. He entirely lost faith and became an outspoken campaigner against Islam, using his religious knowledge and background to underpin his perceived contradictions in the Quran and *hadith*.

Masri Mulhid, or The Egyptian Atheist, was one of the first to launch a channel shortly after the revolution. When he shared videos of himself declaring that he no longer believed in God, he became the target of harsh criticism. The situation escalated when he filmed himself tearing up the Quran. The Egyptian Islamic satellite channel ElHafez aired the video, which resulted in the sheikhs present in the studio issuing a fatwa stating that it was appropriate to kill him on religious grounds. Masri Mulhid currently works from the United States. He identifies as anti-religious and endeavours to combat the 'destructive' influence of religion on society. The Egyptian Atheist is disapproved of by many for his aggressive tone; however, he justifies his approach by saying that his expletives and sarcasm are necessary weapons required to enlighten society: 'It might be a bit of a rough approach, but I believe that's what it takes to wake someone up from a coma, a punch in the mouth is more effective than a shove in the shoulder.'[9]

7 www.youtube.com/channel/UCQuIoUMMoWaUXnlyEuo-6Ng/videos (accessed 12 June 2019).

8 www.youtube.com/channel/UCow-Uxr3htcnmUK3nWTyN9w/videos (accessed 12 June 2019).

9 www.youtube.com/channel/UCxI5a6mdHUylqTHPVZ_UAzg/videos (accessed 12 June 2019).

Sherif Gaber uses a different method.[10] He uses humour to make young people reflect on religious aspects he considers 'myths', particularly the so-called 'scientific miracles' in the Quran. He often makes sketches playing different characters himself, poking seemingly innocent questions at a 'mainstream' believer who tries to answer Sherif's questions in a recognizable but comical way. Sherif Gaber was expelled from university when he questioned his professor's religious views about homosexuality. He was accused of atheism, imprisoned, and later released on bail. He vanished underground for several years while producing high-quality videos. In March 2018 he was arrested once again as a result of the Salafist al-Nur party filing a blasphemy charge against him, accusing him of attacking Islamic religion and law, disturbing the public peace, provoking strife in society, denying the definitive truth of Islam, and criticizing the Prophet Muhammad.

The trigger launching the trajectory towards doubt and non-belief can be manifold. Existential questions that often begin at a young age, strengthened at college or during intensive readings, by personal experiences perceived as unjust but legitimized by religion, by travelling abroad, or meeting with alternative ideas and lifestyles can also precipitate a deep personal search.

The religious background of non-believers is varied, most describing their families as 'religiously moderate', although some label their families as strict 'fundamentalist' or Salafi. Whereas a few described themselves as former strict or Salafi Muslim, most non-believers used to be 'moderate', somewhat 'lazy', 'negligent', or 'sometimes praying, sometimes not'. However, most initially felt the urge to delve deep into the religious sources before eventually – usually after a painful trajectory – renouncing their faith.

For most non-believers it is not a bolt from the sky, no sudden awakening; they would tell me: 'You don't wake up one morning to discover you're an atheist.' It is something that evolves, it takes time and effort to undo religious ideas and habits ingrained in the socialization process within the family and to develop the new paradigms and lifestyles of a non-believer.

For some, particularly those who lean towards more literal interpretations of religion and who discovered contradictions in the scriptures, the process of unlearning can be truncated, if explosive. Rania, for instance, 'de-converted' in two months. She explained in the Black Ducks Show (episode 37) that: 'They would even call me a *"sheikha"*. They used to tell me I had great future

10 www.youtube.com/channel/UC_CKL5F9i7e9sPnZcxXP3HQ/videos (accessed 12 June 2019).

in Islam, but I am really happy that I got to know the truth . . . I abandoned Islam, because one small mistake is enough to destroy it completely. There are so many mistakes in Islam.'

Several non-believers explain that leaving Islam was invested with deep emotional anguish and pious fear. Mahmud, for instance, told me how hard it was to finally cast off his fears and denounce his faith. The confirming step for him was exposure to evolutionary theory, introduced to him by a friend:

> I simply couldn't deny it. I was convinced. And then it hit me: God can send me to hell for something I did not choose to do, because I did not choose this conviction. Conviction happens because of the evidence. The conviction was forced upon me because of readings and evidence. You cannot choose it. And that is the only thing that God hates! God will not tolerate this conviction . . . I was convinced but I did not dare to take the step. To declare to myself, at least to myself, I could not do it! It was very hard. Because once you do it, there is a lot of work you have to do! You have to define right and wrong again from the start.

Once he had 'figured out' that God 'wants us to believe without conviction', he declared himself, if only to himself, an atheist.

Being raised with negative stereotypes about atheism makes the realization that you have become an atheist yourself a complex and stressful experience. Elham, for instance, described her fear for the boogie 'atheism':

> I was really afraid of my own thoughts in this time . . . I felt threatened somehow that there is this idea that is threatening my belief of God. My upbringing made it the worst thing that could happen to a person. Because you will be cursed when living, and when you die you go straight to hell . . . I felt threatened all the time: there is this boogie called atheism.

For most of the non-believers I met, the revolution was a watershed moment in their political awakening. It was also crucial in their trajectory towards doubts and non-belief and finally letting go of 'boogies'.

The Revolution and Questioning Authority

Values such as freedom of expression, democracy, freedom of thought and conscience, equality, and secularism were high on the political agenda of the young people involved in the revolution. They did not actively ask for the freedom of (no) religion, but rather demanded the separation of state and religion and freedom of expression. Accordingly, for many activists the freedom of (no) religion was part and parcel of their fight for freedom,

equality, and a secular state, irrespective of their personal beliefs. Adham, a young atheist from a Muslim background, told me about the importance of the concept of freedom for his experience of the revolution: 'I started to realize that I'm not the only one, there are others just like me. Other people who believe in the same way I believe. They believe in freedom as a concept not in freedom as a religious concept. They believe in equality. They can disagree with you but still defend you.' In addition, some of the most profiled revolutionaries were actually non-believers, although it was mostly after the revolution that people became aware of this. The fact that several of the revolutionary heroes were non-believers encouraged others to come out and declare their non-belief.

For most of these young activists, whether believers or non-believers, the religious authorities had undermined their appeal because 'they had chosen the wrong side of the revolution' by supporting the regime. This failure of the religious authorities, both the Islamic Azhar and the Coptic Church, to connect with the revolutionary forces in the initial stages of the revolution angered many young people, repelling them from religious institutions. Even popular preacher Amr Khalid, who urged young people assembled on Tahrir Square to return home, lost many of his younger devotees. The politicization of Islam and the ensuing power play during and after the revolution also contaminated religious discourses and consequently alienated many from religion. This was compounded by the one-year rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, which proved a conduit for doubts about the credibility of Islam as a political system. The Muslim Brotherhood's maxim, 'Islam is the solution', fell totally flat with the younger revolutionaries. One atheist I met told me:

> If you're continually advocating 'Islam is the solution' and then you get the opportunity to put this into practice and then deliver nothing. Well . . . you're actually a disaster! So, Islam is not the solution! Of course they did everything in their power to cover this up: this is not Islam blah blah blah. That's not Islam blah blah blah. So what the fuck is Islam? If Islam is not the Muslim Brotherhood, not the Salafis, so who or what is Islam? The Azhar? It is infected with Muslim Brothers and Salafis as well! Is it Daʿish [IS]? Some people opted for that and went off to join them. And others found out 'yeah, better with no religion actually'. So I choose to be an atheist.

The revolution not only encouraged emancipation and liberation with its political goals of, among other things, freedom of speech and consciousness, but also by the sheer experience of being part of the historic moment in the

overthrowing of a ruling power. It was felt as a huge empowering event with enormous potential, not confined to the political arena, which morphed into a deep feeling of personal empowerment. Most of the young atheists I met were actively involved directly on Tahrir square or were following the revolutionary moments from a distance on social media. Not all women were allowed to participate and some were still young at the time, but all felt personally engaged. As Alber Saber, an activist atheist from a Christian background, saw it: 'Do you think someone who would take to the streets before the revolution and who chanted against Mubarak would be afraid to reveal his beliefs?'[11]

Losing fear of the ruling power and its repressive apparatus was a significant empowering experience. It also enabled the questioning of different kinds of authorities, as a young female atheist explained to me. Elham was forbidden to participate directly in the revolution by her parents for fear of being killed or raped, but she nevertheless experienced the huge empowering effect of overthrowing Hosni Mubarak:

> Any person under thirty and anyone born up to until 1981, any Egyptian, came to consciousness knowing one thing: Hosni Mubarak is the president. He was a part of the hierarchy. 'Okay there's God, there's religion, and there's also Hosni.' And we couldn't change him, *whatever* happened. Being able not only to say no, but to say no in these huge numbers and to actually throw him out of his position made people think . . . well . . . if he can go, so any authority can go! What about the authority of God?

Ibtisam similarly explained how this feeling of empowerment during the revolution and the downfall of Mubarak quickly boiled over into questioning religious authority:

> That's what I like about the revolution. It could be a collective experience and at the same time a very personal one. After the revolution I was still wearing the *hijab*. Then I started to question not just Islam, but the notion of God himself. I compared him to the president, to tyranny, God as tyrant. Somebody is in charge all the time; you're never free. Even if you think you're free. For me this was the starting point.

Yet it did not stop at questioning state and religious authorities, but moved on to the third pillar of authority in Egypt: parental authority or patriarchy. Ibtisam continued: 'Actually, after the revolution we started rethinking everything in our life, from politics, religion, what goes on in your family

11 www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/01/27/alber-saber-brotherhood-will-drive-the-people-to-secularism.html (accessed 10 June 2015).

and the relationship with your father to the ties with your friends. You start questioning everything.' Zahra, a female atheist, adds: 'The revolution made the people want freedom and I think religion is the antithesis of this. People reject religion and God because they want to be free. I reject religion. We owe the revolution many things. There's a sexual revolution going on as well, not just the religion thing.'

We can thus observe a clear relationship between the revolution and questioning authority. Conscious reflections on inherited practices and refusing to blindly follow authorities are part of the process unleashed by the revolution in Egypt. This impacted the three pillars of authority in Egypt: state, religion, and patriarchy (van Nieuwkerk 2018). Below we will unpack the contestations in the field of politics, religion, and the family from both sides: the authorities and the non-believers.

Contesting Political and Religious Authorities

Atheists entered the political field. They were active during the revolution as well as during the ousting of President Morsi. They also met with the committee of fifty who penned the new Egyptian constitution in 2014, asking for a complete 'secularisation of the state'.[12] They campaigned for the removal of a prescribed category of religion from the ID card and also for a civil law to replace the religious family laws.

Non-believers obviously contest religious authorities and the idea of God, whether openly or in private thought. They perceive contradictions in the Quran, entertain doubts about the exemplary nature of the Prophet Muhammad, and point at scientific theories that contradict religious explanations. They criticize perceived injustices with regard to women, minorities, and non-believers within religion. Yet the way the Egyptian state – backed by religious authorities – combats atheism cannot totally be explained by these political divergences and contestations. Atheism appears to rock the very foundation of the Egyptian state.

Particularly since the Islamic Revival of the 1970s, processes of secularization, as analysed in the west where religion is relegated to the private sphere and secular principles inform the public realm, have been almost inverted in the Egyptian context (Krämer 2013). The public sphere is largely ruled by religious-moral norms, while 'freedom of religion' and 'freedom from

12 http://chronikler.com/middle-east/egypt/atheists-out-closet (accessed 10 June 2015); www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfPEXqiXfMg (accessed 10 June 2015).

religion' can only be practised in the private realm. For that reason, atheism is not only a religious problem, addressed by religious authorities through campaigns and guidance of the youth, but also a political threat that has to be addressed by the state.

According to the penal code, three articles are at the state's disposal: Article 98 of the penal code stipulates that 'the contempt of heavenly religions' through written, oral, or any other means that could lead to sectarianism is punishable by between six months and five years in prison, and/or fines of between LE500 and LE1000. According to Article 160, the desecration of religious symbols is punishable by imprisonment of up to five years and/or fines of between LE100 and LE500. Article 161 stipulates that mocking a religion or religious rite in public is a crime carrying the same penalties as Article 160. This law is not only used against non-believers, but also against Christians and Shi'a believers who can be accused of blasphemy or defamation of Islam.

In December 2017, a new law was proposed that directly criminalizes atheism. The draft law proposal was put forward by a member of parliament. This draft law has, at the time of writing, not been implemented. The drive behind this proposal provides clear insight into the fear of atheism as an issue for the political order. Although the new constitution, ratified in early 2014, guarantees absolute religious freedom and freedom of thought, expression and opinion, we have seen how the blasphemy laws provide ample opportunity to prosecute non-believers. Therefore, why is this new law directly criminalizing atheism needed? To understand the rationale for the proposed outlawing of atheism, it is important to investigate further the entanglement of religion and politics within the Egyptian state.

Ex-president Morsi was asked during the Egyptian presidential election campaigns, aired on Al-Nahar TV in 2012, about his position on religious conversion and freedom of worship. He answered:

> With regard to the first question, about religious conversion, the well-founded principle in Islamic law is that there is no coercion in religion. This means that one must not be forced to believe in a particular religion. It is between me and my Lord. It is between the Egyptian citizen and his Lord. If he wants to change his belief, he is completely free to do so. There is a common misconception with regard to apostates and their punishment by death. This needs to be clarified. As long as the apostate keeps it to himself, rather than proclaiming it in public, thus becoming a danger to society, he should not be punished in accordance with the Islamic punishment for apostasy. However, someone who proclaims his apostasy in public,

> and calls for others to follow suit, is a danger to society, according to its norms, beliefs, laws, and constitution. If somebody acts in a corrupt and erroneous way in his own home, nobody has the religious or legal right to knock on his door, and ask what he is doing. But once his home turns into a den of iniquity, which threatens society, the law and Islamic law intervene.[13]

Two issues are noteworthy. First, hidden non-believing is not the main issue according to Islamic law, but speaking out is perceived as a great danger for society – and that is exactly what we are currently witnessing in Egypt. Second, since the public sphere is strongly influenced by Islamic law, open atheism needs to be outlawed.

However, religious extremism is considered equally as threatening as non-believing; the two are considered two sides of the same coin, as becomes clear from the following excerpt from the minister of religious endowments, Mukhtar Goma'. He stated on 16 January 2018 that his ministry was taking steps on all fronts to make Egypt immune to 'atheist, heretical and extremist ideas and to contain the spread of atheism in Egypt'. He continued: 'All efforts should be mobilized to fight irresponsibility and deviation in our society, because these are the ones which lead to the spread of atheism. Irresponsibility begets atheism, and we should fight both, because they are two faces of the same coin.'[14] The public order should be informed by a conservative-moderate form of religion and all forms of extremism – both religious and non-religious – should be annihilated.

ʿUmar Hamrush, secretary general of the Religious Affairs Committee, during a debate on the draft ban on atheism, seconded the idea of Goma' that atheism 'is just as dangerous as the phenomenon of . . . radicalism, and we should do our best to fight both'.[15] Influential editor-in-chief Khaled Salah wrote in an opinion piece in the newspaper *Egypt Today*: 'The dangers of terrorism are known, but not many know that atheism and terror are equally destructive. Atheism, also, weakens one's identity and calls into question established beliefs in history, canons, religious symbols, the Prophet's companions and followers, and ultimately leads to the collapse of the foundations of entire nations and of their sacred beliefs.'[16] Egypt is not unique in equating

13 www.memri.org/tv/mohamed-morsi-during-egyptian-presidential-elections-campaign-conversion-religion-allowed-if-not/transcript (accessed 8 January 2019).
14 http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/1/288240/Egypt/Endowments-ministry-taking-steps-to-protect-Egypt-.aspx (accessed 8 January 2019).
15 http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/1/288240/Egypt/Endowments-ministry-taking-steps-to-protect-Egypt-.aspx (accessed 8 January 2019).
16 www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/40633/OPINION-The-atheists-are-coming (accessed 8 January 2019).

atheism with terrorism. The same holds true for Saudi Arabia (Whitaker 2014). We thus see in the political discourse of the Egyptian state, backed by religious authorities and large segments of society, that atheists are seen as deviant, destructive, unnatural, and a threat to the public order, on the same footing as terrorists.

Atheism is perceived as a force to potentially destroy both the public and political order. The public and political order rest on the performance of public morality. The most common accusation against non-believers is that they are immoral and become atheists to be free of religious restrictions regarding sexuality. In the view of religious authorities and society at large, atheists simply want to indulge in 'sinful' and 'lustful' practices. Elham, in explaining her fear of the boogie 'atheism', highlighted precisely this aspect: 'Society made it sound like an unethical way to live. It is not only about atheism or your belief in God but it is about your moral code. If you are an atheist, you are a bad person; you sleep with other people; you drink a lot of alcohol. They made it sound like an amoral position.' The equation of non-believing with immorality makes abandoning faith a very sensitive issue for women. This brings us to contestations around gender and sexuality.

Contesting Patriarchal Authorities

Gender issues are a significant motivation for both men and women to move away from religion. Islam – and Christianity – is perceived to enforce unequal relationships between men and women and to suppress sexuality. Many male and female non-believers are engaged with issues of injustice and discrimination against women and against other marginalized groups, such as the LGBT community. After being introduced to feminist ideas about male–female relationships, particularly at college, several female non-believers initiated a critical enquiry into religious gender constructs.

Sarah explained in the Black Ducks Show (episode 81) that during her years at college she developed an interest in human rights and women's rights, and studied the Human Rights Charter:

> I noticed how everything conflicted with religion. A clear and obvious image suddenly appeared before me, after years of just not seeing it. I was shocked. I started to hear the Quranic verses depicting scenes of violence and assault, and verses about women. I was horrified. I was shocked. I started to realize that this is wrong. I passed through different phases of disbelief. I would follow the Quran but not *hadith*, because it's erroneous . . . I reached an agnostic stage, believing there is a higher power, not a god in the sense of the

> word or as depicted in these religions, but an energy in the universe, a god inside us, but not known. I concluded with a stage renouncing all illogical, unscientific occults and a spiritual god. The final stage was atheism, because God doesn't exist. The most important reasoning for me was humanity and justice.

In another Black Ducks Show (episode 60), Hypatia – not her real name – a non-believer who wears a mask to conceal her identity, expresses her feminist-atheist vision of the future:

> I would demand freedom to wear whatever I want without harassment or persecution. Nobody should talk to me about my clothes. Second, I want to inherit the same amount as my brother, not half. I want to go to court and testify as my brother. I'm not half a woman who needs to bring along another woman to be complete. I'm not half anything. I'm not a remainder of something. I'm a human being in my own right. I don't need anyone to tell me to do anything. Third, I want this authority to be removed. We need to lift the guardianship off all women in Egypt.

Both female and male non-believers I spoke to questioned discriminatory stances towards women within religion, critiqued fraternal and parental control, or demanded the freedom to remove the headscarf. Most of them eventually did remove the *hijab*, but a few who tried to hide their non-belief continued wearing this iconic symbol of Islam. They insisted on more freedom to go outside and meet up with friends, to choose their own spouses, and to live a more independent life.

It was interesting to see that quite a few of the young non-believers I met left the parental home to share an apartment with other young people. The social custom in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East is to remain with the family until marriage. Yet due to the high age of marriage, a result of the high cost of marriage, men with a good job will rent an apartment with other male roommates until they are able to marry. Most of my unmarried male interlocutors in their late twenties to early thirties had left the parental home. Several of my female interlocutors had also done this, which is even more exceptional. The privacy that comes with living outside parental control provided them with space to develop their own thoughts on politics, and – especially – religion and morality. Rather than being constantly monitored and questioned about their whereabouts, they were free to create their own ways of thinking and living.

Becoming or being a non-believer is generally more difficult for women than for men. This is related to the perception of non-belief as deviance and

immoral, highly gendered concepts. Although for all non-believers being deviant and immoral is bad, it is considered worse for women. The image of a respectable, religiously conservative family is primarily upheld by the conduct of women, which makes non-religious behaviour by women a sensitive issue. In my interview with Mara she reflects on the gendered nature of 'being deviant':

> We are a conservative society. So as a girl it's not appropriate that you have the freedom to move about relaxed on your own or to sleep outside your parents' home, dress as you like. This is a conservative country! You represent your family! If a boy makes a mistake, it's his mistake, but for a girl it ruins the whole family's name. And religion governs morality, so if she has no religion, she has no morality!

The gendered nature of deviance also explains the sometimes violent and extreme measures taken against female non-believers. I came across several cases of severe maltreatment by relatives, whether in the form of physical abuse or psychological torture, with daughters even ending up in (psychiatric) hospitals. Of course, these are extreme examples – and most non-believers stay in the closet to sidestep problems with relatives and society at large. However, these examples provide insight into the gendered nature of non-belief.

Reem, now living in the United States, told her story in the Black Ducks Show (episode 45):

> When I first told them, my family arrived at only two propositions; either I was haunted or I was mad. I studied religion for a long time. I didn't declare my atheism all at once, as a surprise. I did it gradually. However, once I said it, they quickly arrived at only two conclusions. My father visited a sheikh who claimed to speak with demons and stuff. My father told the sheikh that an atheist demon was inside me, and that I wasn't the one talking to them but rather it was the demon speaking through me. My father wanted to send me to this man to exorcise the demon. My mother just said it was simply a case of poor behaviour and that all I needed was discipline. I wouldn't have said what I said if I was disciplined.

Later, Reem was seized by a group of men and taken to the psychiatric hospital at the behest of her father: 'I was committed to the hospital because they see atheism as a mental disorder. They couldn't stand the notion that I might have opinions and beliefs which differ from theirs. In the hospital they seized my laptop and everything else. I couldn't write anything or post anything online. It was an attempt to eradicate my voice.' The reaction of

parents to the disbelief of daughters is sometimes extreme and reveals how they perceive the nature of non-belief: not only as immoral, but also as a question of sanity.

Non-belief is thus perceived as more dangerous and threatening when it is performed and disclosed by women. This primarily has to do with the equation of morality with religion and the fact that the family's reputation is invested in the female body. This heavy investment in female bodies evokes a threat to women's free choice because as non-believers they are perceived to be immoral.

Abandoning the language of politics in favour of moralism is, as Wendy Brown observed, an attempt to discredit political action and neutralize the political dimension of the issues at hand (in Elmarsafy 2015, 133). Yet, in essence, the moral-religious and the political discourses imbricate each other. As we have seen, atheism is generally feared because it kicks against the religious, sociopolitical, and patriarchal order, three structures that are tightly interwoven.

Atheist Spring?

Non-believing and the emergence of atheist discourses in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East are highly intriguing and important developments that exceed their religious dimensions. Atheism questions the chain of authority from the political and religious right through to patriarchal authority; three highly intertwined fields of authority. Non-believers demand liberation from traditions, from religious-moral prescripts, from parental control, and from political oppression. Non-belief entails self-liberation, building an independent life, privacy, and the right to live your life according to your own chosen standards. Claiming freedom of expression, freedom of (no) religion, and a woman's right to take back control of her own body fundamentally threatens the foundations of the socioreligious and political order.

Non-believers' claims and contestations go beyond liberation from religious restrictions by their demand for political freedom and free choice in personal matters. Here we can see the depth of the issues at stake not only for the religious and patriarchal order, but also the political and public order. This provides insight into the backlash against atheism and the political use of apostasy as a means of punishing those who break away from established norms and values. It is not the actual change of religion that engenders the chief problem, but rather the act of rebellion it implies (Larsson 2018, 209). As we have seen, non-believers actually contest the three taboo zones in the

Middle East – politics, religion, and sexuality – and rebel against political, religious, and patriarchal authorities.

Kindled by the 'Arab Spring', which in the meantime has morphed into a 'severe winter', we can observe an 'Atheist Spring' that is equally repressed by the ruling authorities. Yet, as many activists would agree, 'the revolution continues': 'A revolution is a process, not an event. And, as you know, our Egyptian revolution is ongoing. And its path has not been smooth. How could it have been when the interests we are seeking to break free of are so powerful and so pervasive?' (Ahdaf Soueif quoted in Kamal 2015, 159).

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Intersectional Atheisms: Race, Gender, and Sexuality

MELANIE ELYSE BREWSTER, WEI MOTULSKY, AND ANDY CHAN

Intersectionality, which is rooted in black feminist theory, is at the crux of current social justice movements within and beyond atheist communities. Initially theorized and articulated by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality theory asserts that discrimination is multiaxial, not unidimensional, and that holding multiple marginalized identities has a compounding, not additive, effect on life experiences. For example, in the United States, men of color tend to receive harsher prison sentences than white men – with black men receiving even harsher sentences than Hispanic men, and with women receiving more lenient sentences than men overall (Steffensmeier et al. 2016). Thus, prison sentence severity is not a function of any one identity, but rather operates at the nexus of race and gender.

An intersectional lens can also be applied to religion. In a sample of over 1000 Christian sects, men held leadership positions in over 85 percent of them; this number was similar across non-Christian religious groups, at rates of 89 percent men and 11 percent women leading (Chavez et al. 2014). The gender imbalance in religious organizations has been one factor that enables the reproduction of patriarchal values or norms that oppress women, other marginalized gender groups (i.e. transgender people), and sexually diverse populations (i.e. people within the lesbian, gay, or bisexual community [LGB]).

Beyond its interrelation with patriarchy, religion has been faulted with innumerable other cruel or violent forms of oppression across the globe. Indeed, without the dominance of religion, "there would be no religious wars, jihads, or pogroms against Jews, suicide bombings or fatwas, honor killings or female genital mutilation, apocalyptic cults, witch and widow burnings, stonings of adulterers, bombings of abortion centers, or priestly pedophilia" (Warf 2015, 2216). From an intersectional framework, religion may be at the root of several axes of oppression, including racism, sexism, and

heterosexism. It is understandable, therefore, that many marginalized groups may hold *complicated* relationships with religious belief and practice, choosing to leave their faith altogether. Age also plays an important role in secularization; the current rise in conservativism within US politics and religious sects is believed to be the cause of younger generations, for instance millennials, pulling away from religions (Putnam and Campbell 2012). Taken together, it is necessary to examine hierarchies of power not only based on religious belief and non-belief, but also in relation to other axes of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality.

Social Justice, Religion, and Atheism: Racism, Colonization, and Xenophobia

Within the United States and across the globe, religious beliefs have frequently been used as justification for injustice against those with diverse cultural, ethnic, or racial backgrounds. Abroad, religion has spawned contemporary conflicts in the Middle East, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, Cyprus, and beyond (Warf 2015). While Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism have each played a role in oppression across cultures, Christianity, in particular, has been tactically implemented as a rationale for colonization and genocide, as well as a driver of *manifest destiny*, a doctrine that the United States used to justify the theft of indigenous lands. In addition, Christianity was weaponized as a tool of oppression against African and indigenous peoples from the 1600s to the 1800s, as some pro-slavery theologians argued that hierarchy, order, and the submission of "inferior races" was a necessity in modern societies; thus, slavery was not only sanctioned, but also ordained by the Bible.

From this perspective, the word of God is utilized to establish the "Chosen People" vs. "infidels," yet, no matter how *civilized* the infidel becomes, they will always be othered (Lackey 2007). This dichotomy of Chosen vs. infidel has been used to exclude native people of colonized lands, people of color, and other minority groups. Such racist interpretations of religious doctrine were implemented to maintain social order in the early colonies, widely taught to colonized and enslaved people, and internalized by subsequent generations. Twentieth-century African American political activist Hubert Henry Harrison said, "show me a population that is deeply religious and I will show you a servile population, content with whips and chains . . . content to eat the bread of sorrow and drink the waters of affliction" to show the insidiousness of religious beliefs in perpetuating injustice.

Despite the historic harm that Christianity enacted against people of color in the United States, churches have been largely painted as sites of resistance and solidarity against white supremacy (Hart 2013). While this depiction holds some truth – in that Black and Latinx Churches have often been at the frontlines of the fights against racism and ethnocentrism – it is important to note that the atheist-leaning beliefs of social justice leaders have often been lost to history or purposefully erased (Winston 2012). For example, Simón Bolívar, the "liberator" of South America from Spain, was such an infamous freethinker that he was excommunicated from the Catholic Church. In the United States, Frederick Douglass gave an impassioned speech in 1852 wherein he called for infidelity and atheism as an end to Christianity, a bulwark of slavery. Later, in the early to mid-1900s, black intellectuals such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston adamantly promoted secularism. A. Philip Randolph, a labor organizer and prominent figure in the civil rights movement who stood next to Dr. Martin Luther King during his *I Have a Dream* speech, was also an outspoken atheist. Even James Baldwin, beloved author and poet, espoused atheist-leaning views in his time, claiming that if God cannot make society more loving, "it's time we got rid of him."

The erasure of atheism from narratives of social justice, particularly for women freethinkers, has continued in recent years. Indeed, the cultural pressures for women of color to be pious, "respectable," and passive may complicate their visibility in secular activism. Black atheist women such as Sikivu Hutchinson (author and founder of Black Skeptics of Los Angeles) and Mandissa Thomas (founder of Black Nonbelievers) have been on the frontlines of addressing how religion harms people of color by failing to tackle critical issues such as mass incarceration, income and housing disparities, substance use, reproductive rights and contraception availability, and access to quality education (Cameron 2018). Further, calling out religion for colluding in institutionalized sexism or heterosexism, or for espousing harmful ideologies, including the *Prosperity Gospel* (i.e. belief that wealth is a blessing from God), which harms low-income families, is one way that the alleged social justice compass of Black Churches is broken (Edwords 2012). Black atheist women have been at the forefront of pushing churches to abandon harmful practices such as abstinence-only sex education and the promotion of legislation to defund Planned Parenthood. Sikivu Hutchinson, in particular, argues that religiosity is a blight on the lives of people of color in the United States as it reinforces predatory masculinity, dogmatism, and anti-intellectualism that is detrimental to the needs of black Americans (Hart 2013).

Sexism and Gender-Based Oppression

Akin to its relation with race, the ties between religion and gender have also been fraught throughout history; for example, the Apostle Paul is attributed to have said, "I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1 Timothy 2:12). Religions, particularly the "big three" monotheistic faiths – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – have tended to promote deep constraints on women's lives by restricting access to education, confining the passing of generational wealth or titles to men, not providing adequate reproductive services, limiting the ability to travel independently or own land, limiting employment and/or capping compensation, and inhibiting their representation in governing bodies (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Warf 2015). Such constraints are accompanied by culturally sanctioned expectations of women passed down through churches and temples, such as the pressure to bear the brunt of unpaid domestic labor, childrearing, and eldercare. In this way, religious freedom and gender equality may both be fundamental rights, but are in contradiction to one another – with some going as far as claiming that religions are *instruments of gender inequality* (Bloom 2016). Unsurprisingly, positive associations between gender-based inequality and level of religiosity across nations are well-backed by prior research (Woodhead 2007). As such, religiosity's tacit (or often explicit) endorsement of patriarchy has created ripples of sexism with real-world implications for women.

That said, atheists (women freethinkers in particular) have been at the forefront of the fight against patriarchy and sexism for centuries. Annie Laurie Gaylor's book, *Women without Superstition* (1997), provides a comprehensive overview of early non-believing women and their advocacy for rights. These women include Anne Hutchinson (outspoken against the Puritans), Ernestine Rose (instrumental in the Married Woman's Property Act of New York in 1848), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (author of the Nineteenth Amendment), and Margaret Sanger (founder of Planned Parenthood). Annie Gaylor herself was a founder of the *Freedom from Religion Foundation* in 1976, an advocate for the separation of church and state, and a fighter for reproductive rights until her death in 2015. More generally, 87 percent of atheists support abortion being legal in most or all cases. Powerful secular groups such as *American Atheists* have lobbied for healthcare providers to be transparent about their willingness to provide reproductive care; the *Secular Coalition for America*

has fought to end the global gag rule; and *Atheists for Human Rights* provides direct funding for abortion services for those in need (Lee 2015).

Not only cisgender women, but also transgender, non-binary, and/or gender-diverse people have been systematically persecuted and erased by the "big three" religions. Abroad, fleeing risk of religiously sanctioned oppression or death is cited as a major reason for transgender asylum-seekers (Munir 2019). Furthermore, religious communities have been vocal adversaries of laws to instill workplace, healthcare, and housing protections for transgender people; thus, views about the "acceptability" of transgender people divide along religious lines (Goldman et al. 2017; Pew Research Center 2017; Campbell et al. 2019). Illustratively, the Pew Research Center (2017) reported that 39 percent of Christians in the United States endorsed that transgender rights have "gone too far," whereas only 16 percent of atheist or agnostic people endorsed this belief.

Increasingly, secular organizations have begun to speak out against oppressive anti-transgender policies. In response to the 2018 push to restrict the definition of gender to an immutable biological condition determined by genitalia at birth, the president of *American Atheists* stated, "this latest attack on the trans community exposes the deep cruelty and bigotry of the religious extremists who have been installed by the Trump administration at every agency of the federal government." Kayley Whalen, formerly of the *American Humanist Association* and a prominent atheist and transgender activist, argues that secular humanism is the perfect place from which to argue against faith-based oppression of transgender people as it offers "a vision for a transformed society based on compassion, reason, and justice" (Stedman 2014).

Heterosexism

The persistence of heterosexist attitudes and policies within religious communities and organizations across the globe are well-documented (Brewster 2013; Perry 2018), so much so that many perceive faith as anathema to identifying as LGBQT and that a flight from religious intolerance is central to most "coming out" stories for sexual and gender minority people (O'Brien 2004). Churches and temples have historically castigated same-sex behavior as forbidden abominations, resulting in generations of faithful individuals perpetuating these same heterosexist beliefs. As a result, religious groups have spearheaded campaigns against marriage rights, equal employment protections and healthcare, and the ability to adopt children or create

families – they even lobbied for legislation to support the criminalization of same-sex behavior (Warf 2015; Perry 2018).

Some claim that religion, and the Catholic Church in particular, is responsible for the scale of the HIV epidemic because of its unwillingness to acknowledge same-sex relationships or to provide adequate sex education and distribute condoms/PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) to vulnerable communities (Schulzke 2013). In the early days of the epidemic, ACT UP, a queer HIV advocacy group, staged a "die in" on the floor of St. Patrick's cathedral during mass in New York City to protest the Church's ignorant and harmful stance on same-sex relationships and transmission of the virus. As of 2018, over thirty-two million people have died from AIDS and over seventy-five million people are currently infected with HIV (World Health Organization 2018). Turning back to intersectionality theory, the vast over-representation of sexual minority people of color who are victims of HIV/AIDS also speaks to complicity of religious organizations in lack of care for black and Latinx communities worldwide.

Given the painful history between queerness and religion, it is not surprising that the belief that being religious and LGBTQ is incompatible is common; early gay activist Henry Gerber explained that religion was so oppressive that he believed "homosexuality and atheism to be inseparable." Prominent figures in the gay rights movement, such as Harvey Milk (assassinated San Francisco politician) or Dan Savage (media personality and sex educator), have been outspoken against organized religion or are openly atheist. Unsurprisingly, non-religious people and explicitly atheist populations are among the most supportive of sexual minority rights; the growth of the religious "nones" may be at the heart of future secular movements in the United States (Kosmin 2014). Indeed, formerly religious millennials (and younger generations) cite intolerant attitudes toward LGBTQ people as one of the primary reasons that they leave their faith. The Pew Research Center (2014) reported that 94 percent of atheists think "homosexuality should be accepted" and 92 percent favor or strongly favor marriage equality.

Taken together, while it is largely unknown by most, atheists have a rich legacy of leading the fight against religious oppression and subjugation. Most atheists in the United States (69 percent) are registered Democrats (Pew Research Center 2014) – a political party that tries to forefront egalitarianism, multiculturalism, and social liberty. Yet while one might expect that the social justice orientation of atheist people throughout history would lead to high rates of non-belief among those from minority or marginalized groups (i.e. women or people of color), the opposite is true.

The Curious Demographic Composition of Atheists

The inconsistent way that atheism has been operationalized within the social sciences has made it hard to assess in subsequent survey research. For example, how many "non-religious" people can we presume are also atheist? What about people who are unsure about the existence of a God/gods yet still attend church regularly – are they atheist? Determining precise rates of atheism by subgroups (e.g. race and gender) is even more challenging because in many regions of the United States (e.g. the south or the "Bible Belt"), attending church is a cultural norm. That being said, data consistently suggest that atheist people in the United States are most likely to be white (78 percent), male (68 percent), college-educated (43 percent have a college degree, compared with 27 percent of the general public), and younger (their mean age is thirty-four compared to forty-six for all US adults); they are also more likely to live in wealthier urban areas in the northeast or northwest (Zuckerman 2009; Pew Research Center 2014). Such a demographic composition of atheists – wherein most are from relatively "privileged" identity statuses with ample social power – is curious when atheist activism typically champions the rights of groups disempowered by religiosity.

Some authors have speculated that privilege is actually a prerequisite to openly identifying as atheist (Brewster 2013). In more impoverished and/or rural areas, churches are the dominant community hubs – providing resources such as childcare, eldercare, food pantries, and social events. Rural towns or small cities wherein *everyone knows each other's business* also foster a level of social pressure to conform to norms and standards, which typically include attending religious services (Howley et al. 2016). As such, relying on a religious community for necessary resources (including meal assistance and shelter) may preclude some atheist people from openly exploring their religious doubt or from expressing non-belief. Illustratively, for intergenerational families who are dependent on religious relatives for housing, baby-sitting, or resource sharing, "coming out" as atheist may not only be counter-productive, but also harmful to one's livelihood (Brewster 2014).

Disparities in rates of atheism across other identities (i.e. age, social class, education level, gender) may also be partially explained by privilege. For example, the vast majority of eldercare services and social organizations for aging populations are religiously affiliated. Secular societies are also the wealthiest. In regions of the world where "poverty, disease, and lack of education are the norm, religion continues to hold sway" (Warf 2015, 2229); from this lens, religious beliefs are needed to explain or provide comfort in

the face of enormous hardships. Regarding gender disparities in non-belief, it is critical to note that men have generally had more access to "secularizing factors" that are believed to prompt leaving faith, such as access to higher education, higher-income jobs, the ability to travel, contact with diverse populations in the workplace, and exposure to STEM fields; notably, women who occupy full-time, well-compensated jobs are also less religious than those who do not (Brewster 2013). Thus, holding a higher socioeconomic status may (quite literally) afford someone the possibility of identifying as atheist (Schieman 2010).

However, openly identifying as atheist remains risky, even for people with the "protection" of other privileged identities, because of atheist stigma and discrimination (Brewster et al. 2016). Atheist people are one of the most disliked (and unelectable) groups in the United States (Franks 2017). While speculation as to the root cause of this stigma varies, it is thought to include perceptions of immorality, deviance, being unpatriotic, and posing an existential threat to religious people (Gervais et al. 2017). For people from regions, races/ethnicities, or families wherein religiosity is normative and expected, being atheist can be seen as disrespectful toward one's culture. Sikivu Hutchinson (2011) explains that in many communities of color, atheism is "bad form if not outright sacrilege" and that non-believers may be subjected to cultural policing and ostracization. Going further, Clay and Driscoll (2017, 75) note that atheist people of color are "routinely intra-racially targeted, harassed, and marginalized due to their rejection of what is perceived to be an integral aspect of 'authentic' racial/ethnic identity: religious affiliation and traditional religious belief." This threat of facing pushback from one's cultural group is effective in perpetuating atheist stigma and squashing atheist narratives from circulating in some communities of color.

Atheism and Race

Notably, black and Latinx populations in the United States are overwhelmingly more likely to claim that religion is "very important" in their lives than are white populations (Pew Research Center 2014). Specific to black communities that are more at risk for poverty, research suggests that over half of churches provide outreach programs to those in need – making them akin to extended family structures that may not be easily shed. Regarding the racial/ethnic composition of atheist people in the United States, only 3 percent are black/African American, 7 percent are Asian American, 10 percent are Latinx/Hispanic American, and 2 percent are other races or multiracial

(Pew Research Center 2014). It is important to note that depictions of East Asian, particularly Chinese, communities as primarily atheist or non-religious fail to account for the ubiquity of religious beliefs/practices linked to Daoism and Confucianism that are typically overlooked by western scholars as being "more diffuse" and "less serious" than the big three monotheistic religions (Johnson 2014). A recent study of contemporary religion in China found that 44 percent of respondents agreed that "life and death depends on the will of heaven," which certainly disproves the idea that it is a nation of atheists (Johnson 2014).

In their analysis of the narratives of atheists of color, Clay and Driscoll (2017) noted that several themes emerged, including (1) the omnipresence of theism and religious socialization in early life; (2) difficulties in coming out to friends, co-workers, and family; (3) the search for atheist community; and (4) the "triple jeopardy" of racial, gender, and atheist stereotypes they had to navigate when coming out. Indeed, atheism is sometimes described as a *white person thing* that is associated with distrust, and a sentiment captured succinctly by the quote "don't tell me you're one of those!" from Swann's (2017) qualitative study of black atheists.

While few people of color in the United States identify explicitly and openly as atheist, rising numbers (particularly younger generations) are unaffiliated with religion. Concerted efforts by secular organizations are being made to reach out to people of color; for example, Jose Alvarado of *Chicago Latino Atheists* runs a regular group to make atheists more visible in his community via education, community service, and advocacy for the separation of church and state (Edwords 2012). In 2018, the *American Humanist Association* also launched the *Latinx Humanist Alliance*. Other groups such as *Black Atheists* and *South-East Asian Atheists* have gained momentum and membership in recent years.

One group in particular, *Ex-Muslims of North America*, created in 2012 by Sarah Haider and Muhammad Syed, primarily serves South Asian and Middle Eastern atheist groups. This group provides resources to those who leave Islam, in one case in 2018 helping a young, gay ex-Muslim escape being sent to conversion therapy in Nairobi. Ali Rizvi, author of *The Atheist Muslim: A Journey from Religion to Reason*, describes how the refusal to discuss Islam and terrorism in an open and honest way (without skewing toward Islamophobia or avoiding touching the topic altogether) has allowed conservative groups to push their bigoted narratives forward. Thus, he urges for both critique of Islam and the protection of Muslims (Cottee 2017).

Atheism and Gender

In addition to race and culture, gender can also impact one's relationship to religion and non-belief. Men are more likely to be atheist than women, and women also hold significantly more faithful stances and frequent religious practice (i.e. praying) than men. Furthermore, identifying as a woman increases the chance of being confident in the existence of god by 72 percent (Sherkat 2008). Such gender differences primarily exist for Christians in the United States, as non-Christian groups report similar levels of religiosity by gender. As discussed previously, gender-based oppression, lack of access to opportunities, and resultant economic insecurity may make it more difficult or costly for women to leave religion, causing a time lag in secularization compared to men (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012; Schnabel 2016). Women with children are also typically tasked with instilling "moral fiber" in their families, and therefore may experience greater social pressure to keep up religious practice even when they no longer believe (Brewster 2014).

Specific to atheism, men are much more likely to hold hardline "antitheist" stances against religion. Barry Kosmin explains that many women are repelled by the dogmatic and aggressive messaging present in New Atheist communities; as a result, such groups often have primarily male membership (Mooney 2011). Increasingly, women, non-binary, and gender-expansive individuals are opening up about experiences of sexual and gender-based harassment and inequality in secular movements (Guenther 2019). Thus, atheist communities are sometimes perceived to be exclusive clubs for angry men, spaces that do not make adequate efforts toward inclusivity or activism. To take an example, when a well-known former employee of *American Atheists*, Danielle Muscato, publicly transitioned genders, she was subject to vicious online attacks and doxxing from outside of *and within* the atheist community. While supporting the experiences of transgender people has been a smaller focus in atheist movements, their pathway to secularization appears to be irrevocably intertwined with the exploration of gender and its hegemonic norms (Brewster 2014; Hopwood and Witten 2017; Mathers 2017).

Atheism and Sexual Orientation

Unlike the other marginalized identity groups discussed formerly, LGBQ people are actually much *more* likely to be non-believers than heterosexual people. Indeed, in an analysis of General Social Survey data, Linneman and Clenden (2010) reported that sexual minority people are three times as

likely to be atheist or agnostic compared to straight people. Furthermore, most LGBQ people may believe that religion is not an important part of their lives or is only a site of former stress (Le 2015). For sexual minority people, reimagining the same religious doctrines that were previously used to marginalize or dehumanize them in a "more positive" light in order to stay faithful may not feel possible or worth the effort. While there are certainly some religious sects that are welcoming of LGBQ people (i.e. Reform Judaism, Metropolitan or Unitarian Universalist Churches), such congregations are typically in larger urban areas wherein secular resources geared toward fostering community for LGBQ people are readily available. Considering that atheist communities (even "very heterosexual" ones) have historically been affirming and welcoming of sexual minority people, attending explicitly secular organizations such as Sunday Assembly or Society for Ethical Culture may also feel like a better option than religious groups.

Yet organized atheist groups, and specifically more militantly antitheist groups, are facing a crisis of membership: most active attendees are older, white, and male. Understanding the tensions between members of marginalized identity groups and the atheist movement can only be examined through the genealogy of New Atheism.

New Atheism versus Social Justice Warriors

New Atheism began as a response to the World Trade Center attacks in 2001 (Pigliucci 2013). In the following years, New Atheism has risen in popularity, peaking between January 2006 and March 2008 with bestselling books and media attention (Cimino and Smith 2011). During this time, the Four Horsemen of New Atheism arose: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens (notably all white men). New Atheism is obsessed with *scientism*, the view that "the only reality that we can know anything about is the one science has access to" (Stenmark 1997, 19). Accordingly, Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* frames religion as something that is unsupported by science and, therefore, a fabrication. This scientism has enabled New Atheists to use porous reasoning presented as scientific reasoning to justify race and gender-based oppression. In fact, on episode 73 of his podcast *Waking Up*, Sam Harris argues that dated and racist science by Charles Murray (stating that black people have lower IQs than white people) should not be automatically discounted by so-called social justice warriors.

New Atheists shifted from focusing on institutionalized religious oppression to debating religious belief and advocating for change on the individual level only (Cimino and Smith 2011). Eschewing an institutional perspective (like those espoused by African American atheists) may be related to their aversion to social justice, or it may be related to their tendency to be white men led by white men. Exemplary of New Atheism's attitude toward social justice, in 2016 Richard Dawkins shared a meme that parodied *The God Delusion* with a book titled *The Social Justice Delusion*. While this is distasteful on its own, a QR code at the bottom of the image links to the white nationalist slogan "Fourteen Words" (Gauthier 2016). Many of these white male leaders of New Atheism have committed acts of Islamophobia and misogyny. A notable voice of New Atheism, Sam Harris, wrote, "We are at war with Islam" (Harris 2004) and defended profiling specifically for Muslims at airports (Harris 2012). Then, in 2014, he stated that New Atheism did not include many women because it lacked an "extra estrogen vibe" (Harris 2014).

In an *intellectual exercise* on his personal Twitter account, Richard Dawkins compared victims of sexual assault to drunk drivers, out of control of their bodies (Dawkins 2014). Further, after atheist blogger Rebecca Watson experienced unwanted advances from a man in an elevator at an atheist conference, Richard Dawkins told her to "stop whining" (Dawkins 2014). In the wake of the #MeToo movement, several significant atheist men were accused of sexual misconduct. Atheist leaders (including David Silverman, then-president of *American Atheists*, and Lawrence Krauss, who was a professor and a removed speaker at the American Humanist Association) were fired from their positions following revelations of sexual harassment and assault (Marcotte 2018; Winston 2018). Furthermore, Dawkins was removed as a speaker from the Northeast Conference on Science and Skepticism for sharing a video with an "irreverent joke song" (his words) about how feminists would not mind being raped by Muslims (Williams 2016). In response to the outcry regarding their Islamophobic and misogynist actions, Harris and Dawkins bemoan the "postmodern moral relativism" of the "academic left," which they equate to religion's claims of moral authority (Pigliucci 2013).

Atheism's Slide into the Alt-Right

It does not take a lot of mental gymnastics to see how subscribers to the tenets of New Atheism – who are predominantly male, young, and white – were ripe for recruitment by the alt-right. This is in part because there is little

sense of connection and support, and so many atheists turn to the Internet for community. Thus, to understand New Atheism's slide into the alt-right, we need to consider how technology and media have become the environments wherein social knowledge is actively experienced and shaped (Cimino and Smith 2011).

One online community where atheists congregate is Reddit, particularly r/atheism. This subreddit was found to be the third most toxic of Reddit's subcommunities ("toxic" was defined as bigotry and ad hominem attacks) (Biddle 2015). r/atheism's toxicity was eclipsed only by r/TheRedPill – whose philosophy is rooted in far-right, fascist, misogynistic, racist, and anti-Semitic beliefs (Allen 2015; Evans 2018) – another hotbed of scientism (Bacarisse 2017). While other studies and articles may focus on experts and leaders, r/atheism is a place for the "every-atheist" to congregate. It was on this subreddit that rape jokes were lobbed at a fifteen-year-old girl for posting a picture of herself holding a Carl Sagan book (Watson 2011). A significant part of the subreddit's politics is a condemnation of identity-based politics (i.e., activism that focuses on identity-based oppression), which they view as a move away from scientism (Lundmark and LeDrew 2019). Institutional religion is rarely examined; instead, most discussions stay on the individual level, calling out religious individuals in their lives, rather than viewing such actions institutionally. Members avoid having a unified political message, preferring to show people "critical thinking" and "reason." The currency of r/atheism is in logical arguments and debates with religious people. Atheists on this subreddit appropriate a minority identity by focusing on religious individuals who have oppressed them and co-opting the phrase "coming out" from the LGBTQ community. However, despite their appropriation of minority identities, many New Atheists are critical of liberalism – especially as it relates to tolerating Islam (Khan 2015).

Such aversion to social justice makes atheist communities prime recruiting pools for right-wing ideology. While the Reddit studies are a start, other research could examine additional channels of controversial content – namely, 4chan, YouTube, and Twitter, which are major forums of radicalization. YouTube has been frequently cited as a cause of "red-pilling" because of its algorithms, which can lead those interested in atheist content toward extreme and controversial content (Roose 2019). For example, TheAmazingAtheist, a popular atheist YouTube channel with over one million subscribers, frequently targeted feminists and sent rape threats to other users in a discussion on trigger warnings (Myers 2012). In discussing this behavior of certain atheists, Phil Torres (2017) states: "The new

atheists of today would rather complain about 'trigger warnings' in classrooms than eliminate rape on campuses. They'd rather whine about 'safe spaces' than help transgender people feel accepted by society. They loudly claim to support free speech and yet routinely ban dissenters from social media, blogs and websites" (Torres 2017). Indeed, these behaviors and ways of thinking lead some scholars to compare New Atheists to religious fundamentalists, with their claims of certainty, beliefs that society is wicked, and Islamophobia/American imperialism (Stahl 2012). New Atheism, like fundamentalist religions, seeks to impose authority through belief.

When members of the movement bring up women's issues, racism, or other topics of justice, New Atheists claim "mission drift," as if these topics deviate from the goals of the separation of church and state and of privileging logic and reason (McCreight 2012). Those who disagree with this goal or who call out racism or sexism are described as "muzzling" the community. Another woman who left the atheist movement, Natalie Reed, wrote that some activists were invested in atheism because it is the "ONLY legitimate civil rights issue that actually affects *them*," namely because they were not women, people of color, trans, or of any other marginalized identity, and it is perhaps this connection that explains the "increasing association of Atheism with Men's Rights" (Reed 2012). The association of the alt-right with atheists is perhaps most apparent in the theme of the "Cathedral," a conspiracy theory that feminist and other progressive movements, particularly in universities and media, are all part of a "self-organize[d] consensus" (Woods 2019). This conflation of social justice with a religious institution is parodied in the very meme that Richard Dawkins shared of "The Social Justice Delusion": that so-called social justice warriors are no better than the proselytizers and abusers of religious faiths.

This heady mix of tensions between the understandable reactions to persecution by the religious and the need for a social justice lens, the tensions between the privileged and those of underprivileged groups, caused splits from the movement, with many focusing on identities adjacent to their atheism. One of these branches of atheism is secular humanism, which emerged as a response to the lack of ethics and humanism in New Atheist books. Secular humanism establishes itself as between atheism and religious humanism, a blend of philosophy, ethics, and science (Cimino and Smith 2011). However, as this chapter focuses on intersectional atheisms, this discussion will move on to other branches of atheism.

Atheism Plus (Social Justice)

In response to New Atheism's opposition to diversity and feminism, blogger Jennifer McCreight and others created a new social-justice-oriented and inclusive movement, Atheism Plus (A+). A+ began when McCreight reacted to Islamic religious authority Hoyatoleslam Seddiqi, who blamed earthquakes on women dressing immodestly, by starting "Boobquake," a "scientific experiment" in which she gathered "scandalous bodies" and challenged Seddiqi to "come up with a reason for why the ground didn't rumble." In response to Boobquake, many atheists sent her sexual invitations and comments on her chest. The sexual harassment from other atheists at events led McCreight to attempt to speak up about feminism and social justice, but the harassment only grew worse. Thus, McCreight began A+ online.

Some atheists in the A+ movement noted the hypocrisy of New Atheists who would only speak of women's rights when it supported their Islamophobic agenda. For others in the movement, A+ was a place to discuss Islam without Islamophobic voices chiming in. This movement found no fault with engaging in activism with religious organizations for the goal of social justice. A+ would be a place to support atheism *and* feminism, as well as to fight racism, homophobia, and transphobia by using critical thinking and skepticism. The movement distinguished itself from secular humanists by eschewing some of the religious elements of those groups and keeping the confrontational style of the New Atheists. As William Hart (2013) argues, the absolute repudiation of religion that is at the core of atheism is not necessarily liberationist; he concludes that atheism without direct opposition to racism, sexism, and imperialism is at risk of reproducing white supremacy within its ranks.

Concluding Thoughts Regarding Intersectional Atheisms

While atheists tend to benefit from some dimensions of identity privilege (i.e. they are often white, male, and/or wealthier), irreligiosity without support can be an axis of oppression, too. Indeed, for atheist individuals with minority identities (gender minorities, people of color, queer folks), atheism is a source of minority stress (Meyer 2003) that has harmful psychological and physical consequences. This harm can take the form of feeling isolated by one's identity, harassment, and serious physical injury (Hammer et al. 2012;

Smith 2013; Brewster et al. 2016). We need to only look at the murder of Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi blogger who was killed for his secular views, for a harrowing example of the ways in which adopting atheist points of view can be life-threatening (Tharoor 2016).

In recent years, however, atheism has become a tool for oppression as well. It may seem counterintuitive for a dimension of identity to be both a source of and a conduit for oppression, yet we can turn toward intersectionality theory to understand the duality. For instance, when co-opted as part of New Atheism – which is rooted in intellectual elitism, Islamophobia, and toxic masculinity (Harris 2011; 2014) – atheism is a tool for oppression and exclusion: The oppression of individuals from other religious groups, particularly Muslims (Harris 2011), by perpetuating racist beliefs about Muslims; and the exclusion of people who hold multiple axes of identity privilege (women, people of color, and so forth; Harris 2014). Put differently, when atheism exists at the intersection of other privileged identities – whiteness, maleness, and economic privilege (particularly because atheist groups do not typically offer the same financial support as churches) – it can be leveraged to justify the oppression of others under the guise of coming from a place of marginality.

To that end, it is important to turn away from oppressive and exclusionary forms of atheism and instead look to methods for building a more inclusive secularism. One such way to accomplish this goal is to incorporate other belief systems into atheism, such as humanism and feminism. While some groups have attempted to do so – such as Atheism+, which emphasized atheism *plus* social justice (McCreight 2012) – the movement lost steam for a myriad of reasons, including the absence of mainstream support, backlash from various political groups, and its own lack of clarity (e.g. Sobrado 2012; Jack 2013).

At the same time, other groups and movements have successfully merged atheism with a social justice, feminist lens. These groups include Black Nonbelievers and Ex-Muslims of North America. Both of these organizations, much unlike New Atheism, operate at the intersection of multiple identities. One reason that these groups are more successful than failed movements (e.g. Atheism+) is that they understand that atheism is but one facet of many identities, including race, gender, and sexual orientation, and that it is important to support all aspects of identity, as evidenced by Black Nonbelievers' and Ex-Muslims of North America's participation in New York City's 2019 Pride events (Black Nonbelievers 2019; Ex-Muslims of North America 2019).

To say that any belief system is inherently helpful or harmful is problematic. While religion has been used to justify oppressive worldviews and actions – such

as legislation that criminalizes abortion (Rosenberg 2019) – so, too, has New Atheism. It is important, therefore, to take issue with these worldviews *in the context* of other identities. As with religion, atheism becomes weaponized when it falls into the hands of people looking for justification to propagate a harmful agenda. These people tend to be individuals with identity privilege and societal power (heterosexual, cisgender, wealthy, and often white, men). Thus, now more than ever, intersectionality must be at the forefront of religious discourse. Adopting this lens is necessary because belief does not exist in a vacuum; rather, by looking at beliefs in context, it becomes possible to understand that one's beliefs inform and are informed by other aspects of identity. Indeed, one of the draws of atheism is that it has not committed the sins of religion (genocide, the systematic oppression of women, and so on). Yet when atheism is monopolized by people with systemic power, it becomes another place where marginalized individuals cannot feel that they belong, making atheism no safer than the religions it claims to reject.

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Religion for Atheists? Transhumanism, Mindfulness, and Atheist Churches

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Introduction

The concept of "religion for atheists" or an "atheist church" might at first glance seem paradoxical. Indeed, the common understanding of atheism is that it means to be *without* theism or religion. However, there are an increasing number of atheists who engage in what might be seen as "religion-like" practices. There are atheists who gather together on Sundays to sing songs together, listen to engaging presentations, and build community with like-minded people. There are atheists that seek out experiences of "secular spirituality" and "horizontal transcendence" through practices like mindfulness meditation and sensory deprivation. And there are atheists who have dogmatic beliefs about existential and moral questions that they attempt to "evangelize" to others. There are even philosophical treatises written by atheists that advocate for borrowing more explicitly from religion to imbue secular beliefs and values with more meaning and emotionality, including Ronald Dworkin's *Religion without God* and Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists*. In these ways and others, an emerging trend among atheists in the twenty-first century is to practice atheism much like one would practice religion.

In this chapter, I describe some of the "religion-like" beliefs and practices of atheists and other non-religious people. First, I briefly outline the various ways that religion has been defined. I explain how there are many definitions of religion that do not include references to supernatural beliefs or godlike figures, which opens up possibilities for seeing certain philosophies and practices among atheists as being like religion in some ways. Then, I outline some of the ways that atheist beliefs, philosophies, and practices map on to various definitions of religion, with a focus on three examples: transhumanism, mindfulness, and atheist churches. While I will give a brief description and history of each, this is in no way a complete history or accounting of these practices and philosophies. Instead, I focus on explaining how and why atheists and other non-religious

people have taken up these practices and philosophies in ways that resemble religious beliefs and practices.

Definitions of Religion

In the social scientific study of religion, there may well be more definitions of religion than there are religions to study. Religious studies scholar Candy Gunther Brown (2016) explains that there is no "single, universally accepted, historically stable, politically neutral" definition of religion. While some definitions emphasize certain rituals and practices as being the defining feature of religion, others focus on the presence of beliefs about gods or the afterlife. More generally, social scientists typically sort definitions of religion into two categories: substantive definitions and functional definitions. As sociologist of religion Peter Berger (1974) describes in his more detailed discussion of the history and use of these categories, substantive definitions of religion focus on the *content* of a belief system, while functional definitions focus on the *consequences* of a belief system. Substantive definitions of religion point to beliefs about the supernatural and the sacred, as well as certain rituals or gatherings, as being necessary for religion. In contrast, functional definitions focus on what religion does, either for an individual or a group of individuals, be it the cultivation of community, a meaningful ordering of the universe, or providing answers to existential questions. Substantive and functional definitions of religion are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and some scholars attempt to include both substance and function in their definitions. Even so, fleshing out the differences between the two enables a better understanding of how and when atheist beliefs and practices might be considered "religious." Functional definitions of religion can be found in the work of scholars like Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz. For them, the defining feature of religion is not any specific belief or practice, but the *function* of those beliefs and practices in the lives of religious people. For example, Durkheim argues that the function of religion is to maintain and strengthen the collective values and norms of social groups. Through coming together regularly to ritualize beliefs around sacred symbols and beliefs, religion is a powerful tool for establishing order and reinforcing norms. Geertz makes a similar argument, though focused more on the "moods and motivations" that religions establish in individuals. He argues that religions provide explanations for the meaning and order of life, which offers a "uniquely real" set of symbols with which to orient one's life.

Substantive definitions of religion, however, attempt to outline the specific beliefs or practices that make something religious. Peter Berger and Martin Riesebrodt are examples of scholars who have put forth more substantive definitions of religion. Riesebrodt argues that religion is very specifically about the supernatural and the "promise of salvation." He believes that functional definitions of religion fail to adequately distinguish what makes religion unique, and thus proposes that the underlying component of all religions is the practice of communicating with superhuman powers in order to cope with crises and work toward some form of salvation or reward. Berger has similar qualms with functional definitions of religion and argues that religion's capacity to create a self-maintaining "sacred cosmos" is its defining feature. Geertz and Durkheim also suggest some necessary substantive features of religion – Durkheim emphasized the need for a "moral community" (i.e. a church) and Geertz pointed to a belief in transcendental truths as being unique to religion.

Taken together, there are numerous, and often conflicting, definitions of religion. Most would argue that no one definition captures all beliefs and practices that have ever been considered religious, and many definitions include beliefs and practices that many would *not* consider religious. For example, functional definitions are often critiqued for being too inclusive in a way that almost anything could be somehow religious. For example, Emile Durkheim famously argues that even science can be seen as religious, given his definition – both science and religion attempt to classify and systematize the world in ways that establish order and reinforce norms. And substantive definitions of religion are typically critiqued for being too narrow. For example, many substantive definitions include a belief in the supernatural, but not all supernatural belief systems are considered religious (e.g. belief in the paranormal) and not all recognized religions promote supernatural beliefs (e.g. many Unitarian Universalist traditions) (see Baker and Smith 2015). Thus, it is with functional definitions of religion that there is more room to think through how certain beliefs and practices among atheists and other nominally non-religious people might serve similar functions as religion, though there are also substantive practices that atheists participate in that look similar to religion as well, including attending church and meditating.

Secular Spiritualities and the Secular Sacred

The fact that atheism is, by definition, a rejection of theism means that people typically characterize atheism, as well as other forms of non-

religion, as simply a *lack* of religious beliefs and practices. However, it is often argued that to believe in the *non*-existence of gods and supernatural forces is just as much a belief as is believing in their existence, and research finds that many atheists are just as dogmatic about their existential beliefs as religious people (e.g. Baker and Smith 2015). Further, atheists create symbols and holidays to collectively recognize and celebrate their secular beliefs and values, including the celebration of Darwin Day, the satirical worship of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and the use of the scarlet "A" as a symbol for atheist (Cimino and Smith 2014). Through these various practices, atheists are imbuing secular beliefs, rituals, and symbols with sacred meanings, or what sociologist Jesse Smith (2017) calls "sacralizing the secular." Professor of religious and secular studies Kim Knott (2013) explains that even in Emile Durkheim's original conception, the sacred–profane dichotomy is not confined to religion. Something that is "sacred" is set apart or special, while something that is profane is mundane or ordinary. And Knott, along with others, argues that both religious and non-religious people differentiate between things based on their value and give special meaning to certain symbols, objects, places, or ideas. For example, Baker and Smith (2015) find that atheists sacralize and place "epistemic authority" in things like science, reason, and self-knowledge, and Cimino and Smith (2014) find that many atheist groups "venerate community instead of god."

It is also the case that atheists and other non-religious people seek out and cultivate what many call a "secular spirituality" or "extra-theistic" spirituality (Ammerman 2013; Cimino and Smith 2014). This seemingly paradoxical concept has been made possible in part thanks to the discursive separation of "spirituality" from "religion" that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century. Whereas spirituality and religion were once almost synonymous, today, particularly in the west, many people identify as "spiritual but not religious" as a way to distinguish individual spiritual practices from a more formal, organized religious belief system (Ammerman 2013). This means that even as people in the west become more and more disinterested in identifying with a singular organized religious group, most continue to cultivate "spiritual" beliefs about supernatural beings and participate in ritual practices to affirm those beliefs.

However, the concept of "secular spirituality" goes a step further and strips spirituality of all supernatural or theistic meaning. Cimino and Smith (2014) define secular spirituality as feelings of "awe, wonder, and even transcendence" without reference to any supernatural reality. Typically, this transcendence is seen as "horizontal" rather than "vertical" because it is focused on this-

worldly feelings of "fullness" and being connected to something greater than oneself (e.g. connection to a community or the greater cosmos) (see Schnell and Keenan 2013; Ammerman 2013). Research into this phenomenon has found that a substantial portion of atheists use the language of spirituality to talk about meaning-making practices and experiences in their lives (Schnell and Keenan 2013; Cimino and Smith 2014; Baker and Smith 2015). Even "New Atheist" Sam Harris is a proponent of this practice, and in his book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*, he argues for a "rational approach" to spirituality that he believes can be beneficial for atheists.

Given that atheists and other non-religious people have substantive beliefs and engage in all of the above meaning-making practices in ways that look similar to religious beliefs and practices, some scholars are arguing for getting rid of the religion–non-religion dichotomy all together. For example, Taves et al. (2018) suggest that religion and non-religion both be studied under the umbrella of "worldviews," along with other ideologies like humanism, nationalism, and neoliberalism. They argue that atheism and theism offer competing answers to "big questions" about what exists, how we know what is true, and where we come from, but that both are frameworks for understanding these big questions. They argue that seeing atheism and religion as being on a spectrum with other worldviews enables a better understanding of when these worldviews overlap and when they conflict. Baker and Smith (2015) make a similar argument, though they employ the concept of "cosmic belief systems" rather than worldviews. They argue that both theism and atheism "boil down to the narratives people tell" about the big questions that Taves et al. (2018) describe, and they suggest that secular and religious belief systems have the same formal properties – for example, both can be more or less coherent, dogmatic, or ritualized – that can be studied in the same ways.

Once atheism is understood to be more than just a lack of theism, it becomes easier to understand it as potentially religion-like. Atheists and other non-religious people have a diverse array of substantive secular values, beliefs, and practices, as well as a number of political and social groups through which to share and reaffirm those values and practices. In these ways, atheism can and does serve many of the same functions as religion, and many of the practices that atheists engage in resemble some of the substantive practices found among the religious.

Religion for Atheists?

For the remainder of the chapter, I will focus on three prominent examples of religious-like beliefs and practices found among atheists: mindfulness,

transhumanism, and atheist churches. Starting with mindfulness, I explain how Buddhist and other East Asian religious practices have been co-opted and secularized by consumers across the globe in ways that no longer map onto the religious ideals from which they originated. And atheists and other non-religious people have taken up these secularized practices, like yoga and mindfulness meditation, as a way to cultivate secular spiritualities. Then, I describe transhumanism, a nascent but growing philosophical movement that seeks to accelerate and/or override human evolution and intelligence with technology. While the members of this movement are almost exclusively secular, the philosophies and goals of societal transformation envisioned by transhumanism are religion-like in many ways. Finally, I detail the recent growth of atheist churches in the United States and other western countries. Atheists at these churches are explicitly copying the Christian church model to build community and to "sacralize the secular" in church-like settings on Sundays, revealing how religious forms can serve important functions for non-religious people.

Mindfulness

The term "mindfulness" is the English translation of the Buddhist term "sati," meaning "memory" or "remembrance" (Wilson 2014; Brown 2016). References to this term are found in ancient Indian Buddhist texts, as well as multiple translations that built from these texts. In Buddhism, mindfulness is associated with meditation practices in which practitioners focus intently on their breath without being interrupted by thoughts or emotions in an attempt to become more self-aware and in control. During mindfulness meditation, the meditator focuses on the ins and outs of their breath, noting any passing thoughts, emotions, or physical feelings without judgment or interrogation. Mindfulness meditation techniques were developed in early Indian Buddhism as part of a much larger system of religious beliefs and practices. Buddhist beliefs and practices are diverse, many of which are centered around beliefs about karma, reincarnation, the desire to reduce suffering, and the promotion of compassion and interconnectedness (Kucinskas 2019). Many Buddhists believe that people are perpetually being reincarnated into more or less positive states determined by the force of karma, including into demigods, humans, animals, "perpetually hungry ghosts," or into heaven-like or hell-like realms (Wilson 2014). Mindfulness is just one of many practices that Buddhists believe enable them to achieve more positive states of reincarnation and to ultimately reach a state of nirvana and escape the cycle of rebirth entirely.

In their studies of the secularization of mindfulness and Buddhism in the west, scholars like Jeff Wilson (2014) and Jaime Kucinskas (2019) explain that

the secularized version of mindfulness that many westerners practice today has lost most of the religious meanings that were originally associated with it. To start, mindfulness meditation was historically confined to monasteries and practiced only by ordained monks and nuns, but it has now become a practice that many believe can be taken up by anyone who is interested. Thanks to a number of factors, including increased contact between the east and west due to war, immigration, and globalization, western countries like the United States have become increasingly exposed to and interested in eastern religions and practices, especially Buddhism. For example, survey research estimates that 40 percent of Americans say they meditate weekly and 30 percent say they are familiar with Buddhist teachings (Kucinskas 2019). However, mindfulness practices in the west are not typically associated with the full spectrum of Buddhist religious beliefs. In fact, the success of mindfulness in places like the United States is largely due to the medicalization and secularization of mindfulness practices. Buddhist practices are being used to cultivate a range of more individualized forms of spirituality that often resemble traditional Buddhism in name only. This is in line with the recent trends away from organized religion and toward personalized spiritualities that were described in the previous section. There is also a rapidly growing body of scientific research that points to mental and physical benefits that can be gained from mindfulness practices like meditation and yoga, including reduced stress, weight loss, enriched personal connections, improved immune system health, and reduced depression (Wilson 2014). These types of adaptations have made mindfulness practices attractive for a wide range of Buddhists and non-Buddhists, including people who identify with other religions and people who identify with no religions.

Wilson (2014) explains that one way that mindfulness gets recast for secular audiences is through metaphorical reinterpretations of Buddhist religious symbols and beliefs. For example, whereas Buddhists believe there are six realms of existence that include heaven, hell, human, and ghost, secularized versions of mindfulness recast these as "realms of stress" to be overcome. The "perpetually hungry ghost" becomes recast as "the stress of never having enough," the hell realm gets recast as the "stress of eternal warfare," and so on. Buddhists also believe in a demon god called Mara who tempts and attacks Buddha and his followers. But in secularized versions, Mara represents any sort of obstacle or temptation, from an emotion to a bad habit. In all of these examples, the religious aspects of Buddhism are downplayed while the scientific, secular, and therapeutic aspects are emphasized. And these secularized versions of mindfulness are becoming big business, finding their

way into hospitals, schools, and bookstores, with billions of dollars spent every year on mindfulness products, services, and tourism (Kucinskas 2019). Thus, in order to cast as wide a net as possible, particularly for scientific and academic circles, the "secular mindfulness industry" attempts to define mindfulness as generally as possible to attract both secular and religious consumers.

One example comes from New Atheist and neuroscientist Sam Harris in his book *Waking Up: Spirituality without Religion*. Harris explains that mindfulness has been a key practice he has used as an atheist to cultivate a sense of secular spirituality and inner peace. For Harris, mindfulness helps him gain a clearer understanding and awareness of his embodied self in the world – what he calls spirituality without religion. Harris contends that practicing mindfulness does not require the adoption of any religious beliefs and he draws on scientific research about the health benefits of being mindful to try to convince his readers to take up mindfulness practices. Wilson (2014) and Kucinskas (2019) detail numerous other scientists, academics, and practitioners who have used similar language and tactics to market mindfulness to non-believers. Drawing on the rhetoric of science, rationality, and medicine, secular mindfulness practices have become widely available, and even recommended, by many prominent scientists and doctors for use in secular contexts.

It is important to note that while secularized versions of mindfulness are popular in the west, East Asian countries like China and Japan also practice their own secularized versions of Buddhism and mindfulness. China and Japan are two of the most secular countries in the world – recent findings from the Pew Global Religious Landscape study put the number of religiously unaffiliated people in China at 52 percent and in Japan at 57 percent. However, many of the unaffiliated people in these countries still practice Buddhism and other East Asian religions like Confucianism and Shintoism. Sociologist Fenggang Yang (2018) explains that this is because these practices are not considered religious by a substantial proportion of people in East Asia, and research finds that many people who participate in Buddhist and other religious rituals often do so for "cultural" reasons rather than religious reasons. For example, many Japanese people who say they have no beliefs in the supernatural will carry lucky charms and pray in temples. Thus, across cultural contexts, Buddhist practices are reinterpreted in secular ways that attract both believers and non-believers alike.

While secular versions of Buddhism and mindfulness have become increasingly popular, many would argue that there are still religious aspects to the

secular mindfulness movement. Wilson (2014) explains that for non-religious people who practice mindfulness, happiness and compassion become sacred values and goals to be achieved. And he argues that because mindfulness comes packaged with a set of practices and values, it can become a powerful source of meaning for people, much like religion. In fact, many people have detailed "conversion narratives" about when they found mindfulness and started to apply it to their daily lives. Similarly, Kucinskas (2019) details how a contingent of people in the secular mindfulness movement have ultimate goals of societal reformation through mindfulness. Many believe that through the spread of mindfulness practices, collective social problems like materialism and inequality will be reduced. And Brown (2016) contends that because mindfulness is "steeped in transcendent beliefs" and is associated with moral and ethical values and behaviors, the religious nature of mindfulness is present even in the secularized versions that atheists often practice.

Transhumanism

Transhumanism is a recent philosophical and cultural movement that promotes the use of technology to "hack" human evolution. Through the use of neuroscience, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence, the goal of transhumanism is to enhance and extend human life through technological means. In rhetorical scholar Andrew Pilsch's (2017) book-length analysis of this movement, he explains how transhumanism has become an increasingly prominent movement, particularly in technology policy and bioethics debates, and that there are many overlapping and competing subgroups and philosophies that make up the transhumanist community. One subgroup consists of philosophers and academics who are writing manifestos about the values and potentials of transhumanism. For example, philosopher Max More in many ways introduced the modern concept of transhumanism into common discourse with his 1990 essay, "Transhumanism: toward a futurist philosophy." And sociologist Steven Fuller teamed up with legal scholar Veronika Lipinska to write *The Proactionary Imperative: A Foundation for Transhumanism*, in which they argue that humans are morally obliged to pursue techno-scientific progress.

Another subgroup among the transhumanists is the people doing the actual body modifications that transhumanist philosophers are calling for – the biohackers. Through various practices, including cryotherapy to slow aging, sensory deprivation float tanks to induce meditative states, and the surgical implantation of technological devices into their own bodies, biohackers are attempting to improve and extend their lives by physically altering

their bodies with technology. One of the more controversial goals of some biohackers and transhumanists is the complete digitization of the brain through "mind uploading." What is currently just a popular science fiction trope is an actual reality that transhumanists are working toward, a reality in which immortality is attainable through shedding humanity's organic form. Pilsch (2017) explains that plenty of less extreme practices can be considered biohacking – meditation, fasting, and the quantified-self movement, in which people are tracking their every move with things like smart watches in order to analyze and optimize their mental, physical, and social health. However, while transhumanists may participate in these practices, it is the philosophy and motivation behind them that makes a practice specifically transhumanist. The belief that there is a moral imperative to these practices and that humanity *should* utilize technology in this way is the underlying philosophy that makes something or someone transhumanist. A final prominent subgroup within the transhumanist movement that I will briefly describe is the political subgroup. In 2016, philosopher and futurist Zoltan Istvan founded the Transhumanist Party of the United States, the first ever transhumanist political party, and ran for office as a presidential candidate with a transhumanist platform. Though his bid for the presidency was unsuccessful, he and philosopher Amon Twyman co-founded the Transhumanist Party Global and started to seek out transhumanist supporters and allies in countries across the globe, including Germany, France, and the UK (Benedikter and Siepmann 2016). Nascent transhumanist political parties have since formed in Germany and Britain. The goal of this global network is to promote technology as the primary tool for enacting positive change and reinventing politics as we know them. They seek to reduce illness and aging, social and economic inequality, and climate change through implementing radical technological changes into societies across the globe (Benedikter and Siepmann 2016).

A majority of people who identify as transhumanist are secular. A survey conducted by Humanity+, the predominant transhumanist nonprofit organization advocating for transhumanist values and the "ethical use of technology to expand human capacities," found that 66 percent of its members are atheistic or otherwise secular, and over one-third believe that transhumanism is incompatible with religion. Most transhumanists are white, well-educated men who work in technology, particularly in technology hubs like Silicon Valley in the United States. On the Humanity+ website (www.humanityplus.org), it is explained that transhumanism is a "naturalist" outlook and that transhumanists "seek to make their dreams come true in this

world, by relying not on supernatural powers or divine intervention but on rational thinking and empiricism, through continued scientific, technological, economic, and human development." However, there are numerous components of transhumanism that can be considered religion-like. The organization Humanity+ addresses this question explicitly on their site's Frequently Asked Questions page. The organizers maintain that transhumanism is a secular philosophical and political movement, but that transhumanism "might serve a few of the same functions" as religion. For example, it offers a sense of direction and purpose and has goals of achieving "something greater than our present condition." Transhumanism, the site explains, offers "a very long lifespan, unfading bliss, and godlike intelligence" – all things sought after by religious people, but that transhumanists claim can be found in this world through technological advancement rather than another world through faith. Pilsch (2017) details other features of transhumanism that are similar to religion. One example is the belief in "the singularity" held by many transhumanists. This is the belief that there will be a moment in the near future when the rate of technological development will exceed human intelligence and forever transform the human world. This has jokingly been called "The Rapture of the Nerds" (Pilsch 2017) because it shares similarities with Christian beliefs in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Both are awaiting the arrival of a better future, but transhumanists are putting their faith in technology rather than God as the "savior." There is also a strong moral imperative to transhumanism in which there is a felt obligation to improve and extend human life through technology because of the benefits it will incur for society. Much like the secular mindfulness movement, transhumanists are looking to spread their beliefs and practices as they work toward a larger societal transformation.

Atheist Churches

While self-proclaimed "atheist churches" are a recent phenomenon, non-religious people have been gathering together in organizational and communal settings for some time. For example, atheists and other non-religious people are often members of Unitarian Universalist Churches, which are geared toward interfaith and non-religious people alike. There are also a number of long-standing atheist and secular organizations across the globe, but particularly in the west in countries like the United States and United Kingdom, that are centered around affirming and promoting atheistic worldviews. Research finds that there are numerous types of atheist groups one could join, including political, charitable, social, educational, spiritual,

and communal (Cragun et al. 2017). Some atheist groups are focused on identity politics and reducing the stigma surrounding atheism (this is especially prominent in countries like the United States, where atheism is still highly stigmatized), while other atheist groups are created to facilitate social activities with other atheists – like boardgames, book clubs, and hiking. Atheist churches, however, fall into the "communal" category and, as the name implies, they draw explicitly from religious forms as a means of building community among atheists and other non-religious people. Perhaps the most prominent example of the atheist church phenomenon is the Sunday Assembly, an organization I studied for my dissertation research (Frost 2017). The Sunday Assembly is an international network of secular congregations that started in London in 2013. Two British comedians, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, decided to create a group in which they could do "church-like things without the god bits." They started to meet with friends on Sundays, sing pop songs together, and listen to engaging speakers talk about topics of interest to secular people, including science, community organizing, and social justice. Due to the success of their London-based group, they decided to offer a "build your own assembly" toolkit online and the organization exploded to over seventy chapters over the next few years. Most of these chapters are located in the United States and the United Kingdom, though there are a few chapters in other places in western Europe and Australia.

The Sunday Assembly's motto is to "Live Better, Help Often, and Wonder More," and this is reflected in what the local assemblies center their services and activities around. To "live better," they sing songs together, form small groups based on interests like watching TED Talks and playing games, and they have a section in their service called "One Thing I Do Know," which is a space for members from the community to share a personal experience. To "help often," they put on monthly volunteering activities and start phone trees to enable a support system among members. And to "wonder more" they bring in engaging speakers and a portion of their services is devoted to secular inspirational readings – like a poem or a quote from astronomer Carl Sagan. They also have a moment of silence in their services in which they reflect on the things they learned and how to apply them to their lives going forward. Another example of an atheist church is the US-based Houston Oasis, which uses a similar church model to create community and ritual among the non-religious and which started around the same time as Sunday Assembly. The Oasis meets on Sundays, listens to a band play music, invites

speakers to engage with members, and passes around a hat during services for donations to keep the organization going (Schutz 2017).

Organizations like the Sunday Assembly and Houston Oasis are enacting what sociologist Jesse Smith (2017) calls "communal secularity," and their services serve many of the same functions as religious services. Drawing on a Durkheimian framework, Smith explains that the congregational form that many religious groups utilize has universally appealing functions – it enables an expression of group emotions and values, an embodiment of group ideologies and beliefs, and a sense of belonging and purpose. As I have described throughout this chapter, these are all things that atheists seek out as well, and atheist churches like the Sunday Assembly have been created to fulfill these needs. Or, as Smith (2017) puts it, Sunday Assembly and organizations like it are offering "religious goods" – like moral community and social solidarity – in secular packages. And the founders are very intentional about the religious-like nature of their organizations. For example, the co-founder of the Sunday Assembly, Sanderson Jones, coined the term "lifefulness" to express the ultimate goal of the Sunday Assembly. He makes explicit connections between this concept and secular mindfulness, stating on his website (sandersonjones.co): "Lifefulness is inspired by the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn who created mindfulness by adapting Buddhist meditation in a secular, inclusive, and evidence-based way." He believes that through a secularized congregational form, atheists and other nonreligious people can live fuller lives as a result of the enriching nature of the secular rituals and values this form can cultivate.

Thus, in these ways, Smith (2017) suggest that atheists in atheist churches are "sacralizing the secular" by creating rituals and heightened emotions surrounding certain secular beliefs and symbols. For example, the Sunday Assembly's practice of singing pop songs in a communal setting is meant to cultivate a sense of connection and what Emile Durkheim would call "collective effervescence" among assemblers. However, the sense of transcendence that some feel while singing a meaningful song with others is understood by Sunday Assemblers as scientifically explainable rather than caused by some supernatural force. Similarly, through engaging in volunteer work together and promoting community values centered around helping community members in need, Sunday Assembly produces a shared ethic and value-system that motivates assemblers' actions. In these ways, atheist churches enable their members to transcend the everyday and the individual and engage in ritual practices that promote feelings of community, heightened emotionality, and a sense of shared values. And even though most

members of the Sunday Assembly would deny that their rituals and beliefs are "faith-based," Smith (2017) argues that they do exhibit a form of faith-based narrative rooted in the sacralization of secular-scientific and humanist meaning systems.

Taken together, the purpose and practices of atheist churches are even more explicitly religion-like than are secular mindfulness and transhumanism. Members of these organizations come together on Sundays to connect with a force that they experience to be outside of themselves – the force of community – and they develop shared rituals and ethics based in secular worldviews to accomplish this connection. During their services, they sacralize and ritualize their values of leading ethical and purposeful lives, helping others, and being filled with awe and wonder about the world around them. While the rituals and beliefs found within atheist churches are secular, their church-like form serves many of the same functions as religion.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I detailed three examples of atheist beliefs and practices that can be seen as religion-like – mindfulness, transhumanism, and atheist churches. I explained how not all definitions of religion include beliefs in the supernatural and godlike figures, especially functional definitions of religion that focus more on what religion *does* for people rather than what religion specifically *is* in terms of specific beliefs or practices. Building largely from these more functional definitions of religion, throughout the chapter I detailed examples of how religious forms – such as meditation, churches, collective rituals, and shared beliefs about the meaning of life and the future of humanity – serve many of the same functions for secular people as they do for religious people. Through these practices and shared beliefs, atheists and other non-religious people cultivate community, answer existential questions, transcend the everyday, and reaffirm their identities and values. I also described how atheists draw on the language of secular spirituality and the secular sacred to talk about their experiences of awe, wonder, connectedness, and transcendence, and they often do so together in groups like the Sunday Assembly that have been created explicitly to capitalize on the usefulness of religious forms. Taken together, these examples reveal the ways that atheists and other non-religious people are seeking out "religious goods" in secular packages.

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59

Atheism Throughout the World

STEPHEN BULLIVANT

Two informed estimates of the numbers of atheists and/or agnostics in the world, each published in the last fifteen years by reputable social scientists in major reference works, place the figure around or above half a billion people (Zuckerman 2007; Keysar and Navarro-Rivera 2013). Both rely, in very large measure, on what their authors readily admit to being reasonable guesswork. There is no shame whatsoever in this. Rigorous, nationally representative surveys don't exist in large swathes of the world. In many places where they do, respondents may have reasonable anxieties about declaring, even on a seemingly confidential poll, a politically 'wrong' answer – in *either* direction. For example, China and Vietnam are the world's first and fifteenth most populous countries, both are officially atheist, and neither is famous for freedoms of conscience or religion. Conversely, six of the other top twenty most populous nations – Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Iran, Ethiopia, and Egypt – are those where, according to Humanists International (2019, 20), it is 'illegal or unrecognised to identify as an atheist or as non-religious'. Since these eight countries alone make up perhaps one-third of the world's population, the reasonable margin of error, whether up or down, of even the most careful and considered global estimate is accordingly huge.

Roughly 500 million, give or take several tens (if not hundreds) of million, may therefore stand as the best stab at a necessarily bad job, and I have no ambitions of trying to refine it further in this chapter. The bottom line is that, howsoever one cuts the non-believing cloth, there's a *lot* of it. This is especially so if one includes within the genus of 'atheist' two different species: (1) those who believe that there *isn't* a God or gods (sometimes distinguished as 'positive', 'hard', or 'strong' atheism), and (2) all other kinds of people who don't believe that there *is* a God or gods, but don't necessarily believe that there isn't either ('negative', 'soft', or 'weak' atheism). Common speech often calls the first group simply 'atheists' (in the same way that we tend to call

Homo sapiens simply 'humans'), and most people who would count in the second group 'agnostics' (in the same way we refer to all the other members of the *Homo* genus by a more specific name – for example, *Homo erectus* – though all equally count as 'humans' in the broader meaning of the term). This shorthand is a helpful one, and when I refer to 'atheists and agnostics' separately in this chapter, I'll follow this basic convention. There are, of course, plenty of very well-qualified and well-respected scholars – far better and more respected than me, more to the point – who don't agree with subsuming agnostics within the more general meaning of atheists. It is also certainly true that in the great range of times and contexts covered in this *Cambridge History*, this taxonomic system may not make much sense at all. I note here simply that, whatever its weaknesses, I find it a useful schema, and it also has the virtue of being the official classification of several other major reference works devoted to atheism, including the *Cambridge Companion*, *Oxford Handbook*, and *Oxford Dictionary* (Martin 2007; Bullivant and Ruse 2013; Bullivant and Lee 2016).

Counting Atheists

What I want to do in this chapter is present, explore, and (to some extent) pick apart what data may reasonably be gleaned about the numbers of atheists in individual countries, drawing on highly regarded, cross-national social surveys. Two collections of such surveys, the World Values Survey (WVS) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), will provide the core data, since both are long-established, have consisted of multiple 'waves' (six of the WVS, with the most recent in 2010–14; four of the ISSP's periodic 'Religion' module, most recently in 2018), and cover a diverse set of countries. As we shall see, each goes about gauging levels of non-belief in God in different ways, with rather different results.

Even here it is by no means all plain-sailing, methodologically speaking. Some of the issues are quite general ones, and are applicable to such surveys *in toto*. They rely, for example, on ensuring a genuinely representative sample of participants: that is, the relatively small group of people being questioned, as a microcosm of the population of an entire nation. In the kinds of surveys we're using here, the sample sizes typically comprise 1–3000 respondents as proxies for tens or hundreds of millions of people. For interesting statistical reasons, those kinds of numbers *can*, with careful sampling and weighting, produce a pretty close approximation of an entire population. (A helpful way to think of this might be how it's possible to 'compress' very fine-detailed

digital images into a much smaller space by sacrificing resolution. A 2 MB .jpg map of America is perfectly serviceable if one only needs to know the basic whereabouts of states, major cities, and landmarks, but it won't be much good if you want to zoom in to see your own house.) They *can* do it, but it's not so easy, even in places where, thanks to high-quality censuses and other national statistics, one has a good prior idea of what precisely your sample is aiming to represent (see Wuthnow 2015). As the results of several recent elections and referenda show, even with a lot of money, the best minds in the field, and the credibility/bragging rights of a good number of experienced polling organizations riding on calling them correctly, these methods are not perfect. Just think how much more difficult it must be to produce a genuinely representative sample in countries with poor communications infrastructure – even if surveys are conducted face-to-face, as the ISSP is, for example, one still needs to identify and contact one's interviewees first. Countries with many large and remote areas also face issues: even in a country as small as Britain, the very most rigorous of surveys miss out Scotland's farthest-out islands for practical reasons. Or in countries with large migrant, unsettled, or unofficial populations: think here of the vast shanty towns ringing many of the world's major cities, such as Rio, Manila, Johannesburg, or Mumbai. Naturally, in many places these factors intersect. It is no coincidence, as a recent NGO report puts it understatedly, that 'religious demographics in South Sudan are hard to pin down because reliable data are scarce' (Wilson 2019, 8).

Once one has one's best approximation of a representative sample, asking good questions, and getting reliable answers, on concrete topics such as 'What is your age?' or 'Do you plan to vote in Tuesday's presidential election?' is one thing. Probing people's beliefs, attitudes, or emotions on complex and nuanced questions of identity, ethics, or metaphysics is another thing altogether. There is, for example, a significant scholarly literature around asking all manner of religion-related questions in polls, surveys, and censuses (e.g. Sullivan et al. 2012; Day and Lee 2014; Hackett 2014). And that is before one even broaches the question of translation – which, of course, is critical when trying to ask 'the same' questions across, and in many cases within, different countries (e.g. Tanaka 2010). All these problems, and more, are compounded when one wants to ask good questions and receive clear answers about atheism and related subjects. As is abundantly clear from every chapter in these two heavy volumes, 'atheism' is by no means a single or simple topic, whether philosophically, linguistically, historically, or sociologically. For reasons that are themselves sociologically interesting, it

is only in the past decade or so that serious, sustained attention has gone into studying it among social scientists from a broad range of (non-)religious, geographical, and linguistic backgrounds (Bullivant 2020a). Large-scale surveys investigating religious matters, with robust sampling and a wide range of detailed and well thought-out questions, are rare enough, though there are happy exceptions. Surveys designed with similar attention and care devoted to studying aspects of atheism, agnosticism, and/or non-religion are appreciably even rarer.[1] For this reason, a significant amount of methodological commentary will be offered alongside the charts in the following pages.

All these caveats do *not* mean that we are completely helpless in trying to gauge the numbers of atheists in certain countries. On the contrary, there is a good deal we can say, and with a reasonable degree of confidence. But it is right not to be *over*confident. Rigorously conducted, large-scale social surveys are a supremely valuable tool in understanding the world we live in. But these particular tools are rather more akin to a hammer and chisel than they are to a scalpel or pumice. Hammers and chisels, wielded with care, can produce finely detailed sculptures. So, too, can dynamite for that matter, if viewed at an appropriate distance (*à la* Mount Rushmore). It all depends on the scale and resolution one needs and expects.

A World of Atheism

There are several different ways of gauging the proportion of atheists in a population. The first two we will look at here are both what one might call 'belief-based' measures: that is, they ask respondents whether they have (or don't have) a certain *belief* regarding the existence or not of God.

Most bluntly, the WVS's question is simply 'Do you believe in God?', with a binary choice between 'Yes' and 'No'. In the most recent wave, conducted in 2010–14, this question was asked in fifty-four countries. (Data collection for Wave 7 was underway from 2017 to 2020, and hence wasn't available in time for inclusion here.) The proportion who answered 'No' in each is shown in Figure 59.1.

Evidently, there is much variability: from four-fifths of the population in China, down to too few to show up at this 'resolution' in Morocco, Pakistan,

1 The obvious exception here is the six-country survey, covering the United States, United Kingdom, Denmark, Brazil, China, and Japan, administered by the multidisciplinary 'Understanding Unbelief' team in 2018. Interim findings from the research may be found in Bullivant et al. (2019); much fuller findings are due to be published in monograph form in 2022.

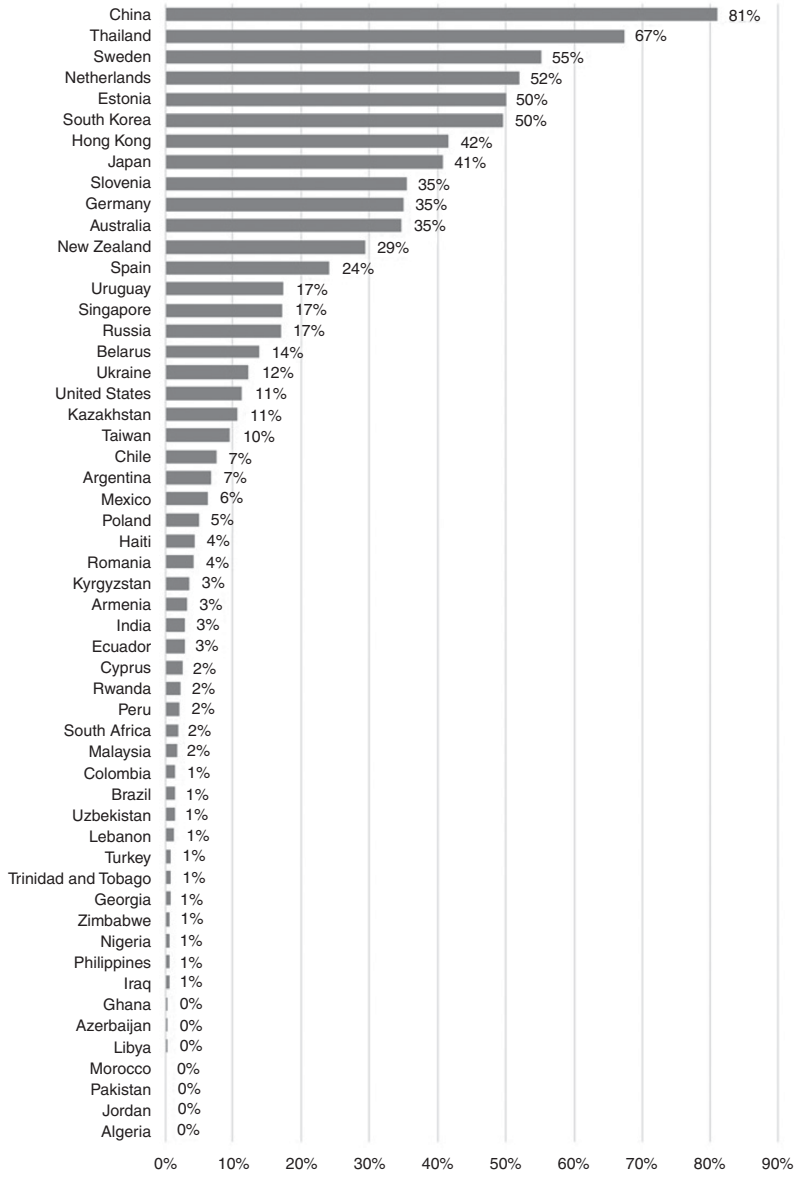

Figure 59.1 Proportion of population answering 'No' to question 'Do you believe in God?' in fifty-four countries (WVS 6; 2010–14; weighted data).

Jordan, and Algeria. (Though note again the considerations highlighted in the previous section, which might feasibly 'encourage' or 'discourage' affirmations of unbelief.) A couple of very general patterns seem to emerge. Being Muslim-majority (e.g. Iraq, Uzbekistan, Malaysia, Turkey), in Africa (e.g. Zimbabwe, South Africa, Rwanda, Ghana), or both (Algeria, Morocco, Libya), tends to correlate with very low levels of not believing in God. Likewise, East Asia (China, Hong Kong, Japan), non-Muslim-majority Southeast Asia (South Korea, Thailand), much of Europe (Sweden, Netherlands, Estonia, Germany), and some parts of the Anglosphere (Australia, New Zealand) have comparatively much higher levels. While not too much should be read into these generalities – there are plenty of exceptions – they perhaps prompt questions for further, more rigorous inquiry. Note too that a single mean value may well obscure notable differences within countries, especially certain very large and diverse ones (India, say). Finally, while fifty-four countries is rather 'a good haul' as cross-national social surveys go, it's only a little over one-quarter of the world's roughly 200 (the precise figure depends on who does the counting, and how). Those for which we have data are not, it should be remembered, a random sample: there are various selection biases, largely to do with funding and logistical feasibility.

While this is a start, a straight yes/no answer does not exactly capture the full range and nuance of epistemological possibilities vis-à-vis God's putative existence. Arguably a better, or at least more nuanced, question is that used in the ISSP. This asks of respondents: 'Please indicate which statement below comes closest to expressing what you believe about God', and offers the following six options:

1. I don't believe in God.
2. I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out.
3. I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.
4. I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others.
5. While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.
6. I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.

One may of course quibble with these choices too; while respondents may only pick one, the categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive (for example, a person could affirm 1 and 3 without contradiction if their 'Higher Power of some kind' is understood as not being any kind of God, personal or otherwise). Nevertheless, they offer much greater scope for precision than does the WVS question. For our purposes, options 1 and 2

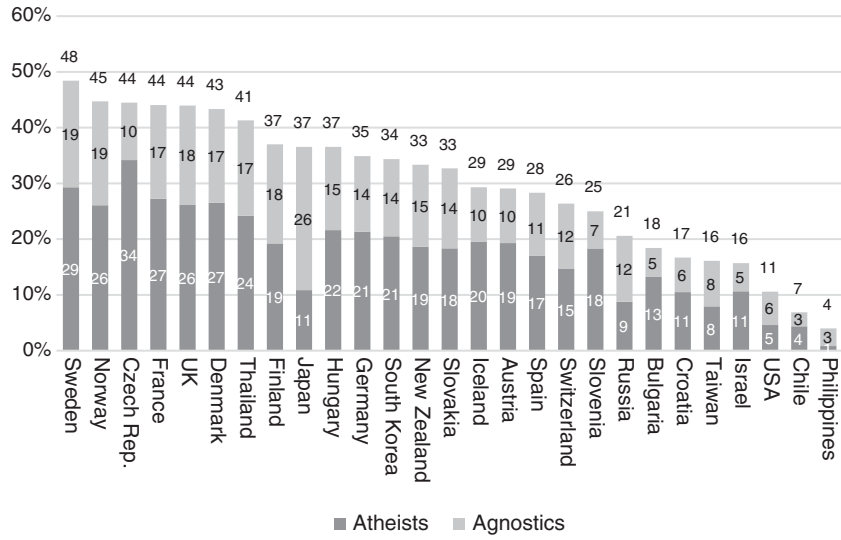

Figure 59.2 Proportion of population affirming 'I don't believe in God' (atheists) and 'I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out' (agnostics) in twenty-seven countries (ISSP 'Religion IV', 2018; weighted data).

are the ones of interest here, roughly corresponding to the popular definitions of 'atheist' and 'agnostic'.

Figure 59.2 likewise shows marked differences in unbelief between countries in terms of both total percentage (from Sweden's 48 percent to the Philippines' 4 percent), and the ratio of (positive) atheists to agnostics (with Japan particularly standing out for its comparatively high proportion of agnostics). From a first glance, it is clear that the ISSP data are notably less polarized than the WVS data, though in large measure this is due to the ISSP's smaller and more culturally homogeneous sample. Over half of the ISSP countries were European Union members in 2018, for instance, compared to less than one-fifth in the WVS. The ISSP also includes no Muslim-majority or African countries.

Since thirteen countries appear in both the WVS 2010–14 and ISSP 2018 data, it is worth briefly comparing the results from their respective belief-based measures of atheism. The comparison is not a perfect one, not least due to the interval between data collection for the two surveys. We must also take it on faith that the sampling strategies used in each country are, if not identical, at least broadly compatible. These caveats notwithstanding, Figure 59.3 shows the direct comparisons. Not surprisingly, such markedly different ways of asking produce different results: it would be strange if they didn't. In a majority of countries,

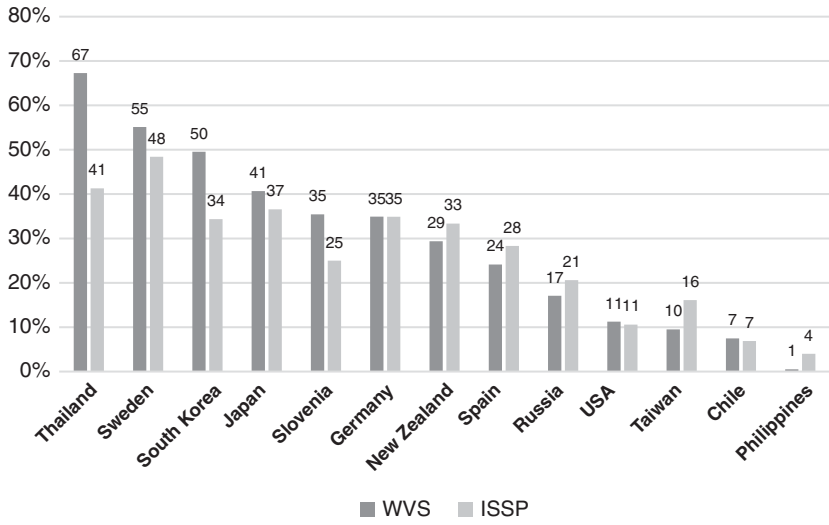

Figure 59.3 Comparison of proportions of atheists (positive and negative combined) in thirteen countries, according to differently worded questions in WVS 2010–14 and ISSP 2018 (weighted data).

however, it doesn't seem to produce much of a difference. Germany, Chile, and the United States show more or less identical proportions of people answering 'No' to the WVS's 'Do you believe in God?' and either 'I don't believe in God' or 'I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out' to the ISSP's more wide-ranging invitation. Japan, New Zealand, Spain, Russia, and (less so) Sweden, Taiwan, and the Philippines all look to be reasonably comparable. The same cannot be said for Thailand, South Korea, or Slovenia, which ought to caution us against methodological complacency. Most obviously, there is clearly something 'going on' between our two sets of data for Thailand: two-thirds of Thais are atheists/agnostics according to the WVS, compared to just two-fifths in the ISSP. This could be due to all sorts of reasons: perhaps the surveys use different words for 'God' with significantly different resonances, perhaps the 'Higher Power of some kind' option in the ISSP captures a significant proportion of those giving a flat 'no' in the WVS. Without a deep understanding of Thai language and culture, ideally informed by on-the-ground qualitative research asking people *why* they pick the answers they do, it is not really possible to say. The same would no doubt be true in other countries too (on China, see Xiaoyang (2010); on Korea, Oak (2012)).

Identifying Atheists

The above methods rely on asking people about their beliefs about the existence of God, and assigning those who answer in a certain way to the 'atheist' (and/or 'agnostic') category. These are, one might say, 'de facto atheists' – that is, those who fit certain (belief-relevant) criteria for being an atheist. Other methods work on the basis of treating being an atheist primarily as an *identity*. Typically, this would involve asking people if they regard themselves as being an atheist, or perhaps asking them what they identify as, religiously or philosophically, and seeing if they volunteer the label of themselves. We might perhaps call such people 'self-defining atheists' ('nominal atheists' would work too, but risks being misinterpreted as implying such people as being 'nominal' in the tokenistic sense of the term, which is not intended here at all). This distinction may at first seem a little hair-splitting in nature, but it is an important one. And these kinds of distinctions are not limited to thinking about and counting atheists. (For example, do we count the number of 'Christians' in a population according to who ticks the requisite box on a survey, or according to who meets a certain set of criteria, in some combination of believing certain doctrines, doing certain things, and/or having had certain rites – e.g. baptism – done to them?) These two categories, de facto atheists and self-defining atheists, are obviously not mutually exclusive: plenty of people would count as both. But they are not neatly co-extensive either.

In some countries, the term atheist carries with it a certain stigma, such that even many de facto positive atheists wouldn't present or see themselves in this way (Gervais et al. 2011).[2] In the United States, where this stigma has been most studied, there has been long association of atheism with un-Americanness and a lack of patriotism (Edgell et al. 2006). Accordingly, recent identitarian activism has sought to counter this by encouraging de facto atheists to also be 'out and proud' self-defining atheists too (Taira 2012; Kettell 2013). Likewise, in parts of post-communist Europe, *ateizm* retains negative implications from having been 'a standpoint adopted by propagandists and salaried demagogues' (Tomka 2004, 110). As such, many people who are indeed atheists may for a variety of social reasons be reluctant to self-describe as such. Conversely, in those countries where atheism or secularity

2 Still more intriguingly, recent data suggest that this reticence may apply not just to identity-based measures but to belief-based ones also (Gervais and Najle 2018). Further research, extending the initial US study to other countries, is currently being undertaken.

have become culturally normative, there is good evidence that some people self-identify as 'atheists', but when asked about their beliefs as to God's existence are, in fact, not atheists at all (Remmel and Friedenthal 2020).

In practice, most attempts at gauging the numbers of atheists in a population using identity-based measures are fraught with problems. This is a particular shame, since one sees them often quoted in the media or in supposedly rigorous academic sources. Take, for example, the WVS's attempt at asking people directly: 'Independently of whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you were . . . 1. A religious person; 2. Not a religious person; 3. An atheist. 4. Don't know.' This is a strangely formulated question in several respects. In the first place, it implies that being 'an atheist' and being 'a religious person' are mutually exclusive, which – as we'll discuss below – is not the case. Even more puzzling, though, is that it forces respondents to choose between being 'an atheist' and being '*not* a religious person'. It appears to be implying that there is a spectrum from 'religious' to 'not religious' to 'atheist', but it's all done very confusingly if that is indeed the intention. In any case, as is clear from Figure 59.4, there is a wide discrepancy between the WVS's belief-based and identity-based measures of atheism. In many countries, far more people say they don't believe in God than say directly that they're 'an atheist'. Yet this is not so everywhere: Hong Kong and Taiwan stand out in this regard.

Earlier waves of the WVS were even more confusing on this point, since their questionnaire specified 'convinced atheist' rather than just 'atheist'.[3] In fact, it is quite common for 'atheist' to be so qualified in surveys or statistical digests, though I'm not sure why. Compare the distinction used by the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, a major and much-cited reference work, between atheists and the non-religious. By atheists are meant: 'Militantly anti-religious or anti-Christian agnostics, secularists, or marxists.' The merely non-religious, on the other hand, are said to be 'Persons professing no religion, no interest in religion; secularists, materialists; agnostics, but not militantly antireligious or atheists' (Barrett et al. 2001, 27, 29). This criterion is by no means helpful, especially since the encyclopaedia neither defines 'militancy' nor suggests how it may be accurately measured. Moreover, 'Militancy is used as the main criterion for distinguishing the atheists from other persons without religion (the non-religious). But militancy is not used as a criterion between different types of, say, Christians' (Hiorth 2003, 122).

3 The switch from 'convinced atheist' to 'atheist' in the root (English) questionnaire occurs with Wave 5 (2005–8), although the combined data set for all the waves simply gives 'convinced atheist'.

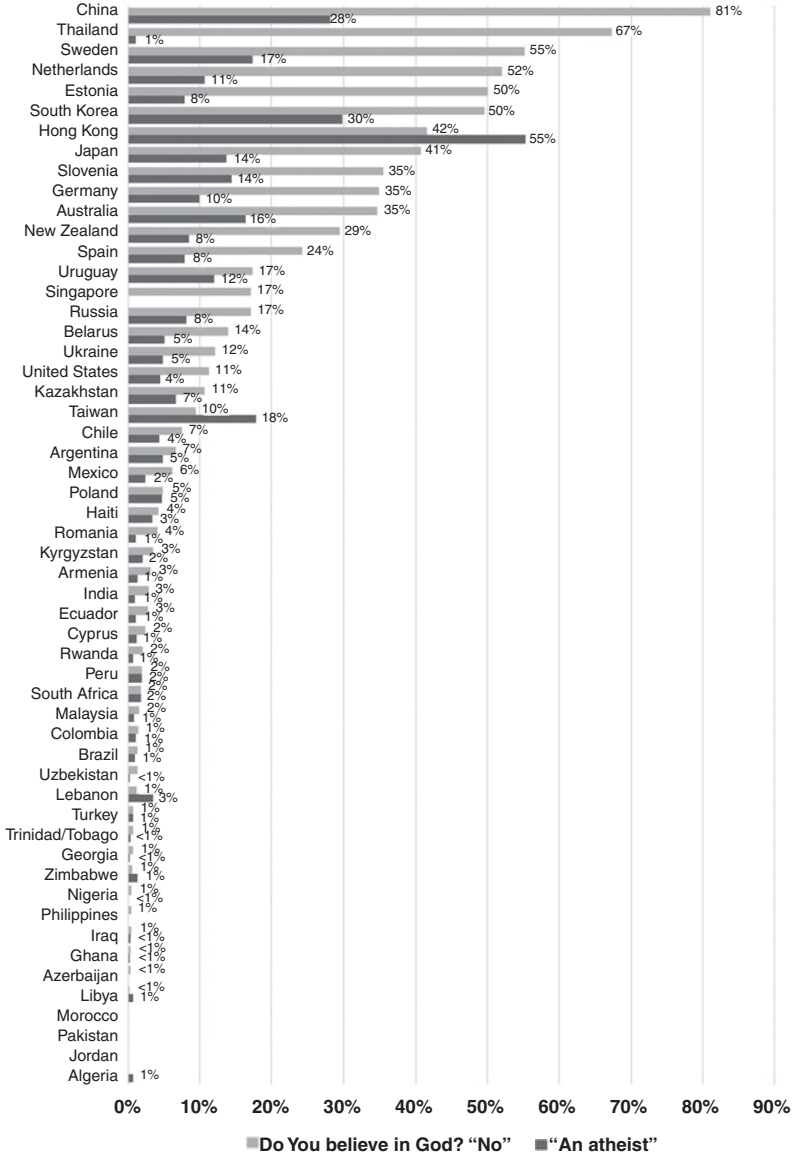

Figure 59.4 Relative proportions of those saying they don't believe in God ('de facto atheists'), and those identifying as 'an atheist' ('self-defining atheists'), in fifty-four countries (WVS 2010–14; weighted data).

Elsewhere in the sociological literature, one sees 'atheist' prefixed with sobriquets like 'convinced', 'out and out', and 'hard core'. Other categories are rarely augmented with comparable epithets: one can identify as 'a theist' or 'a religious person' or 'a Zoroastrian' without affirming a particular level of commitment or zeal.

Another commonly used identity-based measure is based on asking people what their religious affiliation is ('What is your religion?', 'What religion, if any, do you regard yourself as belonging to?', etc.). These kinds of survey questions typically list a range of major religions/denominations along with some version of 'None', 'No religion', or 'Nothing in particular'. Some also offer 'Atheist' and/or 'Agnostic' as specified options. Most don't though, but have an 'Other (please specify)' box, in which respondents can and do write these in themselves. The fact that only a very small percentage of people generally choose, or actively write in, these options in these types of survey questions is often taken as proof of the paucity of atheists and agnostics. Regardless of the precise question wording, this is a deeply flawed way of divining the true number not only of de facto atheists, but even of self-defining ones. This is so for two reasons. The first is, as noted above, these categories are not mutually exclusive: which box should an atheist/agnostic who is *also* a none, a Buddhist, or a Scientologist pick? The second, related problem is that, strictly speaking, 'atheist' or 'agnostic' are neither religions nor religious affiliations at all (as many atheists and agnostics are understandably swift to point out), in the same way that 'theist' isn't either. So as an answer to the actual question being asked, 'atheist' or 'agnostic' are what an analytic philosopher might term a category mistake.

Atheism and Religious Affiliation

This last point leads us inexorably on to another. While there is clearly a rather tangled relationship between religion and atheism – as attested throughout these two volumes – in terms of survey research it is probably best to try to keep the two things separate as best one can. This is evident, for example, in the common media conflation of 'nones' (i.e. people who say they have no religious affiliation) with atheists. In America, study after study going back to at least the 1960s has found that a goodly proportion of nones are not atheists or even agnostics at all. Furthermore – and this point is rather less often noted – an also-goodly proportion of people claiming a religious affiliation are nonetheless de facto atheists and agnostics. If this is so in countries where the

dominant religious traditions are *not* atheistic,[4] then this is obviously a huge issue in those countries where things are not quite so clear-cut. Globally speaking, there are plenty of countries whose populations would appear to be both very religious and very atheistic. This is, as we shall see, especially so in certain East and Southeast Asian countries, where several long-standing religious traditions have either included atheistic strands, and/or whose metaphysical visions do not map neatly onto western understandings of theism and atheism (Frazier 2013; Vallely 2013). It would, however, be wrong to assume that genuinely atheistic religions are a purely eastern phenomenon. Home-grown European examples – if not full-fledged 'religions' (another tricky term to pin down!) then something very like one – from the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries are covered in detail elsewhere in this volume. A fair few so-called New Religious Movements, including well-known ones such as Heaven's Gate, Peoples Temple, and Scientology, were or are arguably also atheistic.

Figure 59.5 makes the point rather well. It breaks down the religious affiliation of those answering 'I don't believe in God' (i.e. positive atheists) to the ISSP's six-option question. In many countries there is a strong, though not perfect, positive correlation between being a de facto atheist and identifying with no religion. This is so in nations including the Czech Republic, France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, where the overwhelming majority – eighteen or nineteen in every twenty – of atheists are also nones. (Although it of course doesn't follow that the majority of nones are also atheists.) But out of a total of twenty-six countries in the sample, eleven have one-third or more of their atheists affirming a religious affiliation; in five of these more than half did so. Five countries are especially instructive since in each of them the most popular religious/denominational identity is a different one: 99 per cent of Thailand's positive atheists identify as Buddhists; 81 per cent of Israel's as Jews; 53 per cent of Bulgaria's as Orthodox Christians; 55 per cent of Denmark's as Protestant Christians; and 10 per cent of Taiwan's as Taoists, with a further 30 per cent as adherents of 'folk religions' (cf. Yang and Hu 2012).

In each of these places, there are good, context-specific reasons why a significant number of atheists would identify in this way – some theological, some cultural and ethnic, some political and nationalistic. This is not the

4 Well, I say that, and it's obviously true in the most straightforward and helpful sense. But for those interested, there's a theological rabbit-hole – indeed, an entire warren – to be explored here (see Bullivant 2020b)!

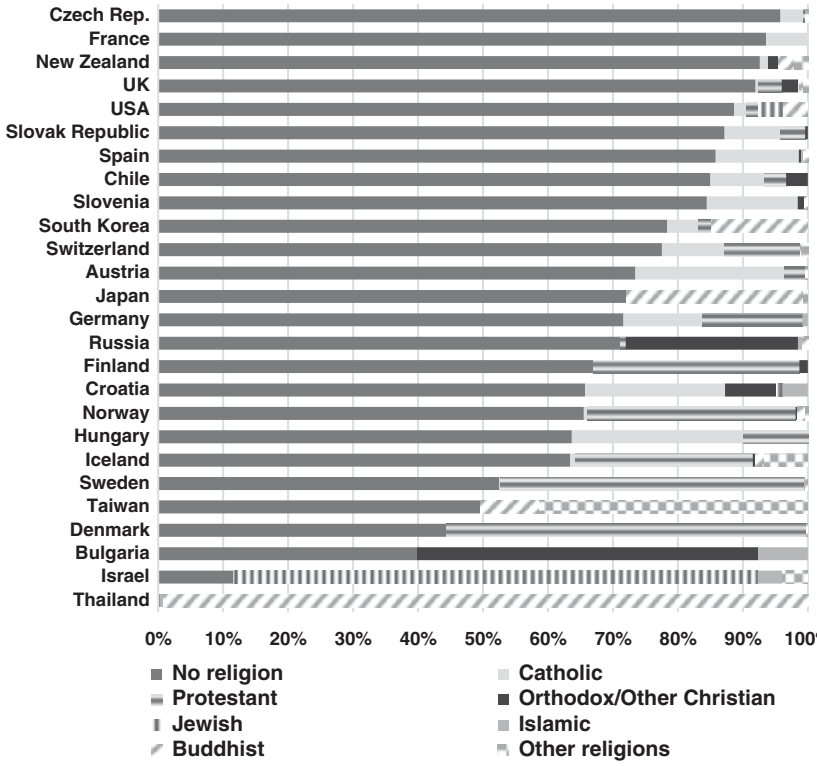

Figure 59.5 Religious affiliation of those affirming 'I don't believe in God' in twenty-six countries (ISSP 2008; weighted data).

place to delve into specific cases. The basic point, however, should be abundantly clear: attempts to count atheists via religious affiliation questions, either directly by offering or allowing 'atheist' or 'agnostic' as an answer, or else indirectly with a 'none' category out of which one extracts one's disbelieving subgroup (as though no atheists or agnostics lurk within any of the other categories), is likely to provide a notable undercount.

Conclusion

The studies summarized in this chapter demonstrate two things. The first is that atheism, whether broadly or narrowly conceived, is a large phenomenon in many, very different parts of the world. Even in some countries where only a relatively modest proportion of the population can be so designated, as with

the United States' 11 per cent – a good example here, since it's the same on both the WVS and ISSP ways of measuring de facto atheism (see Figures 59.1 and 59.2) – it is worth recalling that this amounts to around twenty-eight million people.[5] The second is that, even though atheism might be *conceptually* simple (namely, 'An absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods'; Martin 2007; Bullivant and Lee 2016), it is often sociologically complex, as it exists concretely out loose in the real world – in large measure, this is why we have so frequently resorted to methodological divagations in the course of surveying the stats. The numbers we have relied on, however neatly packaged into clean-looking graphs, are the products of a combination of different methodological decisions and practical exigencies. This is partly why different surveys (Figure 59.3) or different ways of gauging atheism within the same survey (Figure 59.4) can sometimes come up with wildly different estimates. Such seeming anomalies, in the social sciences no less than in the natural ones, often show us that both our methods and our theories are in need of further refinement. The fuzziness surrounding much of even our basic understanding of atheism's prevalence, let alone deeper enquiries into (say) demographics, can and should motivate us to delve deeper: to ask *why* it is that different question wording seems to nudge respondents one way over another; to probe the varying connotations that certain seeming-synonyms might have in different times, places, or translations; and to understand the diverse intellectual, emotional, cultural, and social factors that converge around markers of identity.[6] Fortunately, a good deal of this work has already begun.

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5 Based on official estimates of a resident adult (18+) population of slightly over 327 million people as of 1 July 2018 (US Census Bureau 2018).

6 'Jewish' is a good case study here, especially in light of Israel's showing in Figure 59.5. On 'Jewish atheism' in particular, see Berlinerblau (2013).

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PART IX

CONCLUSION

60

Reflections

MICHAEL RUSE

One of us, Stephen Bullivant, wrote the Introduction to this collection, so it seemed like a good idea to have the other, Michael Ruse, write a short, de facto Epilogue. Ruse is a philosopher and so what he has to say rather reflects his field of scholarship. In particular, in looking at such a project as this, a large collection of essays on the history of atheism – probably the most exhausting project that either of us will engage in during our whole academic careers, but also one of the most exhilarating and important – Ruse's inclination is to turn to Immanuel Kant for guidance. In his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), the great German philosopher wrote: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." What can I know? – epistemology – What should I do? – ethics.

Epistemological Questions

What can I know? What can I know about atheism? Well, first there is the question of meaning. Philosophers are often ridiculed because of their obsession with language, an impression hardly dispelled when you learn the important twentieth-century, Austro-British philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, said "Philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday" (1953, §38). Well, as a general statement, that simply isn't true. It's not a language problem about whether a tree makes a sound falling in the forest when no one is around. But Wittgenstein did have a point. A huge amount of time is wasted in arguing about things, when it turns out that people are arguing about things that may have the same name but have entirely different meanings. A fundamentalist Christian and a postmodern theologian may argue for hours about whether or not God exists, and then it turns out that the fundamentalist is defending someone like the old chap in

the clouds in a bedsheet in Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam," whereas the theologian is defending the "ground of our being" or some other incomprehensible entity.

All of this obviously has immediate relevance to the atheism question. Take a paradigmatic atheist: Richard Dawkins. "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully" (Dawkins 2006, 1). Take a paradigmatic believer, Billy Graham: "True faith is not a blind leap in the dark, with no reason or evidence to support it. Instead, our faith is in the living God, and He has given us all the evidence we'll ever need to show us He is real and worthy of our faith and trust."[1] Fine and dandy. Now, what about the Dalai Lama? Surely, he is a lot closer – a whole lot closer – to Billy Graham than he is to Richard Dawkins. Or, if you don't much care for evangelicals and/or Americans, what about St. Thomas Aquinas? "The truth of the intelligible things of God is twofold, one to which the inquiry of reason can attain, the other which surpasses the whole range of human reason" (Aquinas 1975 [1259–1265], 7). And yet, the Dalai Lama does not believe in the Creator God, the Designer God, of Christianity (Ruse 2015). He believes in lower orders of Gods, part of the system like humans and lower animals, but there is no one being who thought it all up and kicked it all into being and motion. From that perspective, in any sense of the word, the Dalai Lama is an atheist.

What is the moral to this? What is the bottom line? Obviously, in one sense, you can and should and must use the word "atheist." Richard Dawkins is an atheist. Billy Graham and St. Thomas were not. However, that said, you must be very careful with your use of the word and the inferences you draw from this. It is easy, too easy, to say "Oh, they don't believe in the Christian God. They must be atheists." Not so. They could be Jews, for a start, believing in a Creator/Designer God, but without some of the frills that Christians ascribe to their God – the Trinity, for instance. Second, they might believe in a God but not a Creator God. This, for instance, seems to be the position of someone like Plato. As he explained in the *Timaeus*, he believed in a Designer, the Demiurge, but the Designer worked with already-existing materials (Cooper 1997). Did the design come with the material or was the design imposed on the material? Either way, the Designer was not

1 https://billygraham.org/answer/evidence-of-gods-existence.

responsible for the existence of the material (Sedley 2008). Plato's position is an early forerunner of what later became known as deism – a god who designed but then did not interfere with the running of the world governed by unbreakable laws. At the time of writing the *Origin of Species*, this was Charles Darwin's position. "To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual" (Darwin 1859, 488).

Then, third, there are those like the later Darwin, who come under what Darwin's great supporter Thomas Henry Huxley called "agnostic." These are those who simply don't know. Is there a God? Might be. Is there no God? Might be. The present writer falls into this category. It is simple to say that these people are those who don't have the guts to go all the way of their convictions and declare themselves atheists. No doubt there are those who do fit this category. There are, however, those like the present writer who are simply mystified by the whole experience (Ruse 2019; Ruse and Davies 2021). Quantum entanglement, where what happens at one end of the universe is at once reflected in what is happening at the other end of the universe, blows his mind. Despite centuries of agonizing over it, no one really has the slightest idea of the relationship between mind and body (Ruse 2021). And behind all, there is what Heidegger (1959) called the "fundamental problem of metaphysics." Why is there something rather than nothing? The fact that one is a non-believer doesn't mean that this is not a genuine question, for all that Wittgenstein (1965) pretended otherwise (Ruse 2010). I am with the geneticist J. B. S. Haldane: "My own suspicion is that the Universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose" (Haldane 1927, 286). As Richard Dawkins has said, "Modern physics teaches us that there is more to truth than meets the eye; or than meets the all too limited human mind, evolved as it was to cope with medium-sized objects moving at medium speeds through medium distances in Africa" (Dawkins 2003, 19). Fourth and finally, there are those like the Dalai Lama who, while they may qualify formally as atheists, see the world as bursting with meaning – meaning that very much has humans as central. Meaning with a capital "M."

That's four meanings to "atheist," and the inventive thinker can probably identify more. At once, this discussion about meaning leads straight to questions about existence and proof. Let us agree that there are some claims that are true, whatever the reason, and someone who denies them is either ignorant or irrational. Mathematical claims, such as $2 + 2 = 4$, fall into this category. Perhaps they are true because of something akin to the Platonic forms.

Perhaps they are true because of relationships between objects, with no further objective referent. They are true nevertheless and the person who claims that 2 + 2 = 5 is wrong. End of argument, or, rather, no argument. Now, there are certainly those who think the same about God's existence. In his *Autobiography,* Charles Darwin wrote of an experience of his (non-believing) physician parent, Dr. Robert Darwin: "My father used to quote an unanswerable argument, by which an old lady, a Mrs Barlow, who suspected him of unorthodoxy, hoped to convert him: – 'Doctor, I know that sugar is sweet in my mouth, and I know that my Redeemer liveth'" (1958, 96). But generally, I think it true to say, that even the firmest believers sometimes have doubts and even the firmest non-believers also sometimes have doubts.

I am put in mind of the farcical parody of a Church of England vicar's sermon – "Take a pew" – performed by the actor/writer Alan Bennett in the review "Beyond the fringe":

> Life, you know, is rather like opening a tin of sardines. We are all of us looking for the key. And, I wonder, how many of you here tonight have wasted years of your lives looking behind the kitchen dressers of this life for that key.
>
> Others think they've found the key, don't they? They roll back the lid of the sardine tin of life, they reveal the sardines, the riches of life, therein, and they get them out, they enjoy them. But, you know, there's always a little bit in the corner you can't get out. I wonder – I wonder, is there a little bit in the corner of your life? I know there is in mine.[2]

In arguments about God and His existence or non-existence, there's always a little bit in the corner you can't get out. For some noted believers there is always a great deal more in the corner that you cannot get out. Mother Teresa, for instance, was subject to powerful and frequent dark clouds of doubt and non-belief (Bojaxhiu 2009). The same for non-believers. In a letter written toward the end of his life, Charles Darwin said:

> I may state that my judgment often fluctuates. Moreover whether a man deserves to be called a theist depends on the definition of the term: which is much too large a subject for a note. In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. – I think that generally (& more and more so as I grow older) but not always, that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.
>
> (Letter to John Fordyce, 7 May 1879, DCP-LETT-12041)

2 https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Beyond_the_Fringe.

One doubts that Richard Dawkins has ever been subject to powerful and frequent dark clouds of anything very much, but even he admits that there might be a very, very, very little bit in the corner that you can't get out. Logically, it is possible that there may be something to the God business; albeit, highly, highly, highly unlikely.

Ethics

These are issues that have been explored in great detail in the chapters in this collection, so there is no need here to say more on the subject. Rather, to use it as the plank across the chasm leading us from epistemology to ethics. Perhaps the most important finding of all in the atheism debate is the extent to which this is a moral issue and not just a matter of facts. This would not be so were God's existence a matter on a par with the truth that $2 + 2 = 4$. You may ignore the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$, and it could be immoral for you to do so. But whether $2 + 2 = 4$ or not is not a moral issue. But God's existence is, and always has been, a moral issue. Given that there is the possibility of mistake, should you deny the existence of God? Given that there is the possibility of mistake, should you affirm the existence of God?

Plato set the tone for the immorality of denying the existence of God. In the *Laws* he wrote:

> Who can be calm when he is called upon to prove the existence of the Gods? Who can avoid hating and abhorring the men who are and have been the cause of this argument; I speak of those who will not believe the tales which they have heard as babes and sucklings from their mothers and nurses, repeated by them both in jest and earnest, like charms, who have also heard them in the sacrificial prayers, and seen sights accompanying them – sights and sounds delightful to children – and their parents during the sacrifices showing an intense earnestness on behalf of their children and of themselves, and with eager interest talking to the Gods, and beseeching them, as though they were firmly convinced of their existence; who likewise see and hear the prostrations and invocations which are made by Hellenes and barbarians at the rising and setting of the sun and moon, in all the vicissitudes of life, not as if they thought that there were no Gods, but as if there could be no doubt of their existence, and no suspicion of their non-existence; when men, knowing all these things, despise them on no real grounds, as would be admitted by all who have any particle of intelligence, and when they force us to say what we are now saying, how can any one in gentle terms remonstrate with the like of them, when he has to begin by

> proving to them the very existence of the Gods?
>
> (Cooper 1997, *Laws*, Book X)

People like this undermine morality and destroy society. This is an argument that has gone in a straight line from the Greeks to the present. Thus, John Locke in his *Letter on Toleration*:

> Those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the Being of a God. Promises, Covenants, and Oaths, which are the Bonds of Humane Society, can have no hold upon an Atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all. Besides also, those that by their Atheism undermine and destroy all Religion, can have no pretence of Religion whereupon to challenge the Privilege of a Toleration. (Locke 1983 [1685])

This is the theme of countless evangelical sermons today:

> The simple reality is that we live in a godless world. Of course, I don't mean that there isn't a God, or that the true and living God is not active in our world. I mean that the natural state of every person is wickedness, godlessness, and evil. It has always been this way, and it always will be this way.

It isn't going to get better:

> At some point, the "lawless one" will come, and he will come in power, with false signs and wonders. He will be so impressive, so powerful, that many unbelievers will be deceived by him. The wickedness promoted and perpetuated by the lawless one will be on a colossal, sickening scale.

Although, fortunately, God will in the end put a stop to it:

> Yeah, it's bad. Yeah, it's gonna get worse. But the gospel will continue to triumph, Jesus will remain on the throne, and Jesus will finally rid the world of wickedness.[3]

Going the other way, the tune is much the same. Believing in the existence of God is going to lead to immoral behavior. The New Atheist Sam Harris is particularly eloquent. It was 9/11 that sparked his outbursts, and the treatment of Islam by him and his co-thinkers is on a par with the thinking of Bull Connor on the Negro Question. As so often, criticism is ecumenical. Warming things up, the Nazis and the Holocaust are given star treatment. That Nazi anti-Semitism is rooted in Christianity is accepted uncritically. "And while the hatred of Jews in Germany [under the Nazis] expressed itself

3 www.biblestudytools.com/blogs/stephen-altrogge/what-is-this-world-coming-to-exactly-what-jesus-said-it-would-come-to.html

in a predominantly secular way, it was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity" (Harris 2004, 101). This despite the fact that while Hitler certainly believed in some kind of guiding Providence – something has to explain his overconfident stupidity in invading Russia – he was ever condescendingly critical of Christianity and its adherents (Kershaw 2000). Harris is even-handed in his prejudices. He hates Roman Catholics, from their complicity in getting the Nazi leaders safely off to South America when things started to go wrong, to putting Descartes' *Meditations* on the index of forbidden books. Protestants are no more loved. Martin Luther's anti-Semitism, as is usual on these occasions, comes into play. Harris (2004, 106) concludes gloomily: "Unfortunately, this catalog of horrors could be elaborated upon indefinitely. Auschwitz, the Cathar heresy, the witch hunts – these phrases signify depths of human depravity and human suffering that would surely elude description were a writer to set himself no other task."

Perhaps expectedly from one raised in the bosom of the Church of England, for Richard Dawkins (2006) the Catholic Church is a particular focus of loathing. Obviously, in part, this is a direct function of the ways in which the sexual predators in the clergy have done untold harm to innocent children and the perhaps even-more-culpable behavior of their superiors who denied and concealed the crimes for so long. However, Dawkins thinks even greater harm is done by bringing a child up Catholic in the first place. The gloomy superstition, the sexual repression, the knee bending before false authority – nothing can equal the wrong in making another human being cowed by these. And so on and so forth.

Finis

Enough. In this brief Epilogue I do not seek to cover again territory well explored in the chapters of this collection and elsewhere, including the earlier collection on atheism edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (2013). I seek rather to bring this collection to a close by emphasizing again the absolutely central importance of the topic or rather topics of this collection, and to congratulate our contributors in their testament to the worth and meaning of our existence here on earth, irrespective of whether there be a hereafter or not. His thoughts on the God question (all too expectedly) got the great seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza into hot water with the elders of his synagogue. Today, it is he whom we remember, not them. "The highest activity a human being can attain is learning for

understanding, because to understand is to be free" (Spinoza 1985 [1677]). Free of fear in thinking about the God question.

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